

EDITORIAL

Communication and Environmental Politics in the Low Countries: Introduction to the Special Issue

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1 Introduction

Communication is central to environmental politics: from the speeches given at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) plenary meetings and debates among members of parliament in environmental committees to the chanting of demands and grievances in climate protests and, say, everyday discussions about environmental problems among citizens. Through these varied forms of communication, people construct narratives about the environment that shape the way they understand problems, what solutions they think are available and, in the end, what they think should and should not be done (e.g. Louder & Wyborn, 2020). Environmental politics is thereby chiefly a discursive struggle in which people try to make others comply with their narrative about politics and the environment, prescribing its protagonists, heroes and villains, metaphors and plots (cf. Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Crow & Jones, 2018; Stone, 2012).

Narratives are rhetorical devices that guide the interpretation of discourse: the public can self-identify or be affiliated to a social group represented by one aspect of the narrative following shared culture or beliefs (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Hanne et al., 2014). Discourse analysts previously identified these narratives and counter-narratives as prevalent communicative strategies in politics (Hanne et al., 2014; Schubert, 2010). Schubert (2010) establishes four functions of political narratives: (1) personalising (identity of the speaker), (2) integrating (values of a nation or of a political party), (3) exemplifying (individual action or utterance to support the speaker's intentions) and (4) polarising (unwelcome actions of opponents or enemies; Schubert, 2010). A narrative may thus be understood as the ideal 'root metaphor' (Hammack, 2014) or 'extended metaphor' (Bougher, 2014). This 'extended-root metaphor' facilitates the creation of a 'storied world' where characters' goals are evaluated to define different camps, one of which the public is invited to join (Labov, 2006; Musolff, 2019; Perrez & Reuchamps, 2015).

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It follows that it matters who (re)produces such narratives, to what extent and how those narratives spread and in which ways they are challenged by counter-narratives (if at all) (Hanne et al., 2014; Shanahan et al., 2011; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2012).

A good example of this in the area of environmental politics are the heated debates around 'sustainable development' (Smith, 2003; Vanderheiden, 2020). Here, the narrative of 'mainstream sustainability' – focused on business and governments, competition, and metaphors such as 'green jobs' and 'carbon footprints' – is met with such counter-narratives as 'green radicalism', focused on the interrelations between human and non-human nature, solidarity and 'organic metaphors' (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2012). In the Belgian context, for example, environmental polarisation results from ideological narratives on 'dogmatic ecology', which relates to radical and transgressive policies, and 'pragmatic ecology', which relates to moderate and business-friendly policies (Augé & Rondiat, forthcoming).

Clearly, which of these narratives catch on in policy circles matters for the environmental policies that may result from them: the continued pursuit of economic growth easily fits in a mainstream sustainability narrative (or 'pragmatic ecology') but is unthinkable in a green-radical narrative (or 'dogmatic ecology', in polarised discourse).

2 The Political Narrative of Ecocide

In the Low Countries, a particularly popular narrative about politics and the environment has recently centred around the metaphor of 'ecocide'. 'Ecocide' involves a metaphorical conceptualisation of environmental damages. This conceptualisation is related to the way environmental actors (e.g. activists and nongovernmental organisations [NGOs]) metaphorically describe environmental concerns to promote actions. The ideological implications of this metaphor can be observed through the suffix '-cide' which is also attached to words such as 'femicide' or 'genocide'. Similarly, 'ecocide' conceives environmental damages as a crime. Additionally, we can see that these suffixed words draw attention to the victims of the crime, that is, the social group the victims belong to + '-cide' (from Latin, 'to kill'). Accordingly, the ecosystem is personified to become the victim of the environmental crime, in the same way women are the victims of femini+cide.

'Ecocide' thus draws on the personification of the ecosystem, following a major scientific theory (Donahue, 2010; Ogle, 2010) – James Lovelock's Gaia Theory – according to which nature is represented as a system of interactions between species, organisms and the environment. These interactions create a single living entity characterised by its indivisibility: Gaia (Lovelock, 2007). It follows that, in the context of the climate crisis, humans' polluting activities affect all elements of the ecosystem: this impact, following the Gaia theory, can thus be metaphorically perceived as a physical attack on Gaia or as an attack on the many elements comprised within the ecosystem. This eventually leads to environmental arguments associated with imageries of genocide, resulting in the notion of 'ecocide'.

It can be noted that this criminal conceptualisation of environmental issues is particularly prevalent in climate activists' discourse. Augé (2020) analyses four main environmental narratives within a total of 21,646 texts extracted from media discourse, political speeches, scientific articles and activists' discourse. These narratives are: environmental eulogy (e.g. 'green growth'), ecosystem health (e.g. 'Mother Nature's sickness'), climate religion (e.g. climate scientists as 'prophets') and environmental crime (e.g. 'ecocide'). This study finds that, among these four main narratives, the criminal narrative prevails in activists' discourse (123 occurrences among 316 occurrences in total). This prevalence resonates with the long history of political debates over the recognition of the 'ecocide' in international arenas.

This history started in 1973, after the Vietnam War, when the United Nations' International Convention against ecocide was held (Lindgren, 2018; Zierler, 2011). This Convention happened following major contestations regarding the extensive use of defoliants by the U.S. Army in Vietnam. However, this did not result in any enforced regulations. Indeed, this Convention was marked by several controversies which notably concerned the 'intentional' aspect of the environmental crime (Lindgren, 2018; Zierler, 2011). Ten years later, in 1984, the Commission of International Laws initiated a project that involved the recognition of ecocide. Yet again, the final version of this project, released in 1995, did not read any mention of 'ecocide', possibly because of nations' increased interests in nuclear weapons (Higgins et al., 2013). In 2010, the environmental lawyer Polly Higgins proposed to establish the following definition of 'ecocide':

the extensive destruction, damage to or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been or will be severely diminished. (Higgins, 2015, p.61)

This definition was then to be included in a text to update the Rome Statute. This attempt was also unfruitful, but did pave the way for the recent agreement established by the European Commission, in 2023, which concerns the European Law regarding the protection of the environment (Europarl, 2023).

This European agreement effectively led to political discussions around the recognition of ecocide at the European level and, thus, national levels. Notably, the 'ecocide' narrative seems to reflect different national concerns in the Low Countries. We now turn to the discussion of such concerns, as they have been documented in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

3 Narratives of Ecocide in the Low Countries

3.1 Belgium

In Belgium, environmental issues gained significant prominence in 2019 and the 2020s (Kenis, 2020). Surveys and other studies consistently show that a significant proportion of the Belgian population considers climate change to be a pressing

issue (De Muelenaere, 2023; European Commission, 2024). This may explain the decision adopted by the federal parliament (La Chambre/De Kramer, 2024) on 22 February 2024 to include ecocide within the Belgian Penal Code. This inclusion is to condemn “large scale and irreversible crimes against nature” (Greenpeace, 2024). This penalisation of ecocide, however, exclusively applies to environmental damages in the North Sea and to damages resulting from radiation and radioactive waste (Greenpeace, 2024).

This recognition of ecocide generated major disputes both within political and public spheres. Notably, the decision emerged from parliamentary disputes (La Chambre/De Kramer, 2024) that lasted until the day of the final vote: favourable politicians promoted the recognition of ecocide by characterising it as an ‘important modernisation’ (Claire Hugon, Écolo-Groen) and a ‘revolution’ (Vanessa Matz, Les Engagés). The Federal Minister of the Environment also adopted a nationalistic stance on ecocide by representing environmental policies as a form of an international ‘race’. Accordingly, the recognition of ecocide is perceived as a tool enabling Belgium to ‘win’ this ‘race’ (“Je me réjouis et me félicite dès lors que la Belgique s’inscrive dans le peloton de tête en la matière” [“I am proud that Belgium is leading the peloton on this issue”]);¹ Khattabi, 2022). Therefore, politicians who advocate for the recognition of ecocide did not seem to exploit the criminal narrative but tried to shift attention towards national leadership. In contrast, unfavourable politicians perceived it as a ‘silly’ and dangerous decision “of which we’ll not know the end, and it therefore involves risks” (Sophie De Wit, N-VA). Accordingly, these politicians drew on the threatening aspects involved in the criminal narrative: on the one hand, the concept of ‘crime’ resonates with troubling imaginaries (‘genocide’, ‘homicide’, ‘feminicide’). On the other hand, the description of ‘risks’ assigned to these troubling imaginaries may eventually generate major public concerns regarding the impact of such a recognition.

Such political disputes eventually demonstrate that, despite the large-scale support for environmental policies in Belgium (Kenis, 2020), the perception of environmental damages as a crime ultimately paves the way for counter-narratives.

Interestingly, such concerns have also been voiced by some members of the Green Party, in particular by Ecolo. Echoing the different arguments voiced during the vote, Ecolo reflected on the terminology adopted in the Penal Code. They concede that the term ‘ecocide’ may be too complex, preventing politicians in the Belgian Parliament from understanding the full extent of the characterisation of environmental damages as a crime (Ecolo, 2023). Although the term has been used since the 1970s in the Belgian Parliament (Khattabi, 2023; Montavon & Desaulles, 2022), extracts from parliamentary debates (see above) effectively demonstrate that ‘ecocide’ was debated through references to criminal imaginaries, which might have limited the debates over its environmental meaning. In contrast, the Federal Minister of the Environment praised the adoption of this particular terminology and claimed that such criminal imaginaries can effectively shed light on the causal link between human health and environmental damages (notably, through the personification of the ecosystem as victim; Khattabi, 2022). Another major terminological concern voiced by Ecolo revolves around the ‘deliberateness’ suggested by this crime narrative. They argue that, unlike ‘typical’ crimes (like

genocide, homicide, feminicide), environmental crimes may distinguish themselves by their non-deliberate characteristics: environmental crimes may also result from negligence (Ecolo, 2023). This supplements their initial argument regarding the complexity of the term: according to Ecolo, environmental crimes may not be compared with ‘typical’ crimes. It is to be noted that this ‘deliberateness’ involved in the meaning of the term ‘ecocide’ already prevented the United Nations from releasing an International Convention against ecocide in 1973, after the Vietnam War (Montavon & Desaulles, 2022).

Such terminological debates spread outside the Belgian federal government. The crime narrative comprised in the recognition of ecocide raised major concerns among Belgian climate activists and NGOs. Notably, Extinction Rebellion firmly criticised this decision by referring to it as a form of ‘greenwashing’ (Extinction Rebellion, 2022) performed by the federal government: the government relied on a term that implies strong imaginaries, while such imaginaries are, in fact, missing from the adopted definition (Extinction Rebellion, 2022). Indeed, the definition of ‘ecocide’ adopted in the Penal Code involves six criteria: (1) criminal actions must be intentional, (2) illegal, (3) must be serious and large-scale, (4) must have a long-term impact, (5) there must be proof that such damages have an environmental impact and (6) such damages also need to be international, as ‘ecocide’ does not cover national damages. The climate movement argues that these six criteria limit the definition and do not satisfactorily reflect the full extent of environmental crimes (Extinction Rebellion, 2022).

Most significantly, the troubling implications comprised in the crime narrative aroused activists’ fear regarding the impact of governmental decisions on the definition attributed to ‘environmental crime’. Activists warn that such debates over the definition applied to a complex term such as ‘ecocide’ may eventually lead to the criminalisation of climate protesters (Extinction Rebellion, 2022; Greenpeace, 2024), as it was previously observed in France (Augé, 2024). This fear results not only from the complex and misunderstood definition of the term but also from the criminal narratives and counter-narratives and, in particular, an extract of the new penal code that may eventually prevent climate protests (“Atteintes méchantes à l’autorité de l’Etat” [“malicious violations of the authority of the State”]; Extinction Rebellion, 2022; Greenpeace, 2024).

Therefore, the political and public debates over the recognition of ecocide explicitly illustrate the impact of political narratives and, notably, crime metaphors, on environmental politics. In Belgium, debates focused on the complex terminology and the criminal implications that may or may not be specific to the environmental context. We now turn to the debates on ecocide that have recently taken place in Luxembourg.

3.2 Luxembourg

Luxembourg has been identified as the country with the second highest ecological footprint in the world (Earth Overshoot Day, 2024). Yet, it has been actively involved in the establishment of European policies for the protection of the environment (Accord de coalition 2018-2023, 178), showing its increasing environmental awareness and political commitments.

Since the 2023 European Agreement regarding the protection of the environment (Europarl, 2023), Luxembourg has applied the European Law, as the country, like other European countries, was given two years to implement the legislation (InfoGreen, 2024). In fact, Luxembourg was among the first European countries to approve this agreement: the country became one of the signatories in as early as 2018 (Accord de coalition 2018-2023, 178). However, because of the two-year period of implementation, one cannot yet observe the concrete impact of such policies (InfoGreen, 2024).

Luxembourg's environmental commitments have been supplemented by political demands regarding a legal establishment of ecocide. In 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of the Environment initiated governmental discussions around the recognition of ecocide as a judicial concept in European and International Laws (Gouvernement du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, 2021). The politicians referred to the Belgian Penal Code and associated debates over the definition of ecocide (see earlier discussions under the Section 3.1). Their aim was to adapt such a definition to the particularities in the context of Luxembourg as well as to the particularities of other national contexts within Europe (Gouvernement du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, 2021).

This adaptation of the definition to the national context eventually generated debates. The political advocates for the recognition of ecocide suggested that the definition should explicitly include concrete details regarding the characteristics of environmental offences and associated sanctions (InfoGreen, 2024). Like in the Belgian context, the term 'ecocide' was deemed too complex, leading to political disputes over the characteristics and the extent of the 'environmental crime'. These debates significantly impacted the governmental process towards the recognition of ecocide in Luxembourg.

This limit to governmental decisions led to major polarisations within Luxembourg's political sphere. The political opposition, notably *Demokratesch Partei*, criticised the position adopted by the government: they denounced its environmental inaction, its lack of involvement in the establishment of a concrete judicial definition of the term 'ecocide', and the absence of the term within the current national legislation (*Demokratesch Partei*, 2021).

Indeed, like in the cases analysed previously (United Nations' 1973 Convention and the political and public discontentment in Belgium), the 'ambiguity' (Gouvernement du Grand-Duché du Luxembourg, 2021) assigned to the term 'ecocide' was perceived as a limit to its legislative application. Notably, Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Environment both renounced to the possibility of introducing ecocide in the country's domestic laws (Gouvernement du Grand-Duché, 2021; Legilux, 2004). Instead, they aim to increase administrative and penal sanctions regarding environmental violations, following the 2004 domestic law related to environmentally protected areas (mainly concerning plastic waste and plastic packaging; Legilux, 2004).

Therefore, the political debates surrounding the concept of ecocide in Luxembourg also demonstrate the impact of communication on the establishment of environmental policies. The crime narrative seems to have raised questions within the government, which eventually favoured an adaptation of pre-established

environmental policies. This shows that the strong (criminal) implications comprised in the term 'ecocide' caused political concerns: politicians failed to perceive environmental crimes and 'typical' crimes through the same lens. Although domestic environmental policies have been reinforced, the non-recognition of environmental damages as a crime eventually downplays the perception of the impact of such damages. Eventually, these debates illustrate politicians' misconception of environmental impacts, which may be 'penalised' but not 'criminalised'. We now turn to the environmental debates over the ecocide in the Netherlands.

3.3 *The Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, the Party for the Animals (PvdD) submitted a white paper on ecocide at the end of 2020, culminating in a bill on ecocide being tabled in the Second Chamber at the end of 2023 (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2023b). Here too, writing ecocide into law was discursively contested, as shown in the different narratives espoused by members of parliament. For instance, in early April 2023, Henriëtte Prast (PvdD) shamed the Dutch government for not yet having written ecocide into law in a session of the First Chamber. The villains in this narrative are not only the perpetrators of ecocide but also the Dutch government for lagging behind in the 'race' to criminalise ecocide:

The Belgian government reached an agreement last fall to include ecocide as a crime in the criminal code. This made Belgium the twelfth country to recognise ecocide as a crime. The cabinet likes to talk about the Netherlands as a frontrunner, but especially when it comes to making money, as an echo of the VOC [i.e. Dutch East India Company] mentality. For the criminalisation of ecocide, a leading position is no longer possible. The Netherlands is not even in the peloton. (Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2023, p. 11)

Henriëtte Prast thus relies on the nationalistic rhetoric, through the 'race' metaphor, to associate the recognition of ecocide with national interests. Accordingly, the recognition of ecocide is perceived as a tool enabling the Netherlands to 'win' this 'race' (see similar statement by the Belgian Federal Minister of the Environment; Khattabi, 2022). By doing so, Henriëtte Prast promotes the recognition of ecocide by shifting attention towards national leadership. However, as Belgium is already in the 'peloton', the politician resorts to face-threatening strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). She refers to the Netherlands as an acclaimed 'frontrunner', which aims to promote the government's 'positive face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987) conditioned by the country's involvement in this environmental race. Thus, the 'race' metaphor is here exploited to threaten (metaphorically) the government and to map environmental interests with nationalistic interests.

By contrast, Forum for Democracy (FvD) parliamentarian Gideon van Meijeren challenged the very 'identification problem' (Benford & Snow, 2000) of ecosystem destruction in a committee meeting of the Second Chamber that took place later during the same year:

So all the doomsday images being sketched about the state of the environment are not supported by the facts. There's no disaster unfolding. There is no ecocide. The scaremongering must stop. (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2023a, p. 34)

The villains in this storyline, then, are those demanding that ecocide be made a part of the criminal code, basing their standpoint on allegedly inaccurate information. Like it has been observed in Belgium and Luxembourg, the troubling implications of the crime narrative represent the main point of discontentment ('scaremongering'). However, unlike what we saw in the other cases, the argument is not limited to the term and its definition: the argument altogether denies the existence of environmental damages ('there is no disaster unfolding'). It can be argued that the possibly threatening implications of 'ecocide' and the relevance of the term within Europe might have led political opponents to delegitimise environmental advocates. Accordingly, Gideon van Meijeren 'otherises' (Augé & Rondiat, forthcoming) environmental advocates by relating environmental arguments to 'sketched images', environmental politics to 'scaremongering' strategies, and environmental damages as misleading statements ('not supported by the facts'). Consequently, the public is called to identify defenders of the recognition of ecocide as mischievous individuals (the 'villains' in the narrative). Eventually, this political statement represents an effective counter-narrative: instead of criminalising environmental damages, Gideon van Meijeren implicitly criminalises environmental advocates.

This narrative battleground also extends beyond the walls of the parliament: citizens, academics, journalists, NGOs (e.g. Stop Ecocide Foundation) and local governments, all of them participate in the production of narratives and counter-narratives (e.g. Timmer, 2023; Vroege Vogels, 2024). For example, the Municipality of Utrecht in March 2024 signed a manifesto drawn up by the Stop Ecocide Foundation to "request the Dutch government to publicly support the recognition of ecocide as an international crime," one of their goals being to "get it on the international agenda" (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024).

Besides being on the receiving end of such news and press statements about ecocide, citizens are also active producers of (counter-)narratives about ecocide. For example, they produce their own narratives in the comment sections to online news articles on ecocide. To illustrate this involvement, one such online news item presented the directive that would require European Union member-states to incorporate ecocide into national legislation (Timmer, 2023). In the comments section, some citizens formulated an eco-centric narrative, emphasising the "idea to assign legal personhood to the earth," personifying the earth as a victim. However, other citizens put forward a counter-narrative, casting doubt on the underlying understanding of 'nature'. For instance, one commenter called into doubt the boundary between 'nature' and 'farmland' ("The government won't like this, because farmland is also a part of nature"); another argued that practically everything in the Netherlands is unnatural, ridiculing the idea that one could ever prosecute someone for ecocide:

So it has to become like in the old days again? Where are we going to live? Or are we going to make huts for everyone? If we're looking at recent times ... 100 years ago? If you want to go back to that then millions of houses have to be taken down because those were not there yet, Flevoland gone, [dikes and dams] also gone because that's also not natural.

Accordingly, ecocide is here equated to a vague description of 'the old days'. This citizen does not so much argue about the criminal implications of ecocide. Instead, they perceive such criminalisation as a radical form of policy enforcement (e.g. "millions of houses have to be taken down"). The strong implications comprised in the term 'ecocide' have led the commenter to imagine (and fear) environmental policies with equally strong implications. This illustrates the communicative issues that can arise through the exploitation of political narratives: narratives are inherently subjective (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004) and, thus, their interpretation by the public may only be subjective. Here, the commenter adopts a dystopian perspective on ecocide. Although the stance is inherently sarcastic, this comment effectively reflects on the ambiguous characterisation of 'ecocide' in elite political discourse, allowing for misguided interpretations among citizens about the potential implications of writing ecocide into law.

Other counter-narratives tied the online discussion to other issues, opposing the idea of ecocide by linking it to international environmental politics ("What are we talking about ... The rest of the world is laughing their heads off [Brazil Russia India China]") or, for example, shifting the conversation to other related issues, such as EU-level policy on the use of biomass ("Immediately [take] Timmermans to court, for promoting biomass").

Therefore, the debates generated by the recognition of ecocide in the Netherlands shed light on the misunderstanding and conspiracies that can arise from environmental communication in politics. The strong implications comprised in the term 'ecocide' led to political polarisations which, through the exploitation of narratives and counter-narratives, raised questions regarding the characteristics of the actual crime: environmental damages or scaremongering environmental strategies? In turn, the counter-narratives also illustrated the impact of political narratives on the public: the crime narrative attached to 'ecocide' ultimately results in varied understandings of environmental problems and policies.

These three case studies have thus demonstrated the significance of political communication for the establishment and enforcement of environmental policies. Our analysis of the debates related to the recognition of ecocide within the three countries provides significant findings regarding (in-)effective political communication: concrete terminology (e.g. nature – farmlands), emphasis on national leadership, emphasis on causal links (environmental damages – human health), coherent implications (e.g. the 'six criteria' to identify a crime), and contextualisation (local relevance). Within this political communication, political narratives may represent effective tools to guide the public's perception of an issue (the 'storied world'; Labov, 2006), yet they also allow for delegitimising strategies that draw on the subjective conceptualisation of political and environmental issues.

These illustrations of the impact of political communication on environmental politics in the Low Countries will be supplemented by the relevant results presented in each of the contributions included in this Special Issue. These contributions are briefly presented in the following section.

4 Overview of the Special Issue

The three articles in this Special Issue focus on the politics of one of the most pressing environmental problems today: climate change. They each study different actors involved in political communication about climate change (including citizens, political parties and the media) and examine various parts of the communicative process –from the production of narratives to their transmission by media to their reception by various groups.

Through an original survey study in Flanders, Marthe Walgrave studies the segmentation of the Flemish public according to their climate knowledge, attitudes, policy support and behaviour and, in turn, analyses what kinds of information sources different segments of the population draw on. She identifies four relevant segments (engaged, concerned, indifferent and doubtful) and, importantly, finds that each has their own specific media diet. For example, those concerned about climate change and convinced that behavioural change is needed ('the engaged') rely strongly on (elite) traditional news media. This finding exemplifies the persuasive impacts of climate change narratives: traditional news media have been shown to significantly rely on narratives to raise public awareness about political issues (Berber-Sardinha, 2015). By contrast, Marthe Walgrave's study shows that those who do not believe in climate change and feel that the problem is being exaggerated ('the doubtful') are the 'biggest news avoiders' and rely on Facebook as a main source of information. The informal conversations that can take place on a platform such as Facebook do not present the many uses of fully developed narratives (Berber-Sardinha, 2015). Instead, social media enables the public to share a wide range of arguments related to their environmental opinions and experiences (Edwards, 2013). The narratives observed on such platforms relate to users' own evaluation of environmental topics (Piata, 2016). This prevalence of subjective evaluations may eventually hinder the access to fact-checked information on social media. This issue is, however, not limited to social media communication. Discourse analysts also found that traditional news media may favour linguistic creativity over scientific nuances, which can lead to misunderstanding (Schafer & Schlichting, 2014). Eventually, such misunderstanding may generate scepticism (Weingart et al., 2000). Marthe Walgrave's study thereby makes clear that it matters via which media climate-related narratives are transmitted given that they tend to be used by different segments of the population.

Wout Van Praet studies how political parties in Flanders communicate about climate change via positions and programmes on their websites through the lens of the system of appraisal (Hunston & Thompson, 2000). He identifies a consensus across parties about the need for climate action, with Vlaams Belang being the only outsider in that respect. He also finds that parties' narratives tend to lack

expressions of emotion and focus more on the appreciation of things (e.g. complexity and attainability of climate policies) than on the judgement of people and their behaviour (e.g. climate change denial, animal abusers). This finding supplements existing literature on narratives: narratives prevail in political discourse as they help politicians to 'sound right', legitimise their decisions and persuade the population that their policies are good for the nation (Charteris-Black, 2011). They also help them to promote a link between their political interests and individual interests (Hanne et al., 2014). Importantly, such narratives have been shown to have an impact on the public's perception of political issues (Flusberg et al., 2017). However, as demonstrated by the narratives investigated by Wout Van Praet, politicians may favour appraisal over emotions. This pattern has also been noticed in the Twitter posts produced by Republican candidates in the U.S. (whereas Democrats favoured emotional appeal over appraisal; see Sylwester & Purver, 2015). This suggests that, while narratives can represent effective communicative tools in politics, their political implications may only reach citizens when they are deprived of emotions. Flemish parties, as investigated by Wout Van Praet, appear little inclined to engage with other viewpoints in their climate change-related communication (this lack of engagement represented one of the main criticisms addressed by political opponents; Augé & Rondiat, forthcoming), but important differences across parties' willingness do exist (e.g. the dialogues permitted by 'pragmatic ecologists'; Augé & Rondiat, forthcoming).

In the context of growing experimentation with new ways of discussing environmental politics in the Low Countries (e.g. Itten & Mouter, 2022; Vrydagh et al., 2022), the article by Emilien Paulis, Lisa Verhasselt and Raphaël Kies focuses on the 2022 Citizens' Assembly on Climate (*Klima Biergerrot*) in Luxembourg. They seek to better understand the 'coupling' (Mansbridge et al., 2012) of the assembly involving a representative sample of 100 citizens, on the one hand, and the wider public debate, on the other. They do so through a study of the assembly's coverage in on- and off-line media in Luxembourg, from its first announcement, to the government's formal follow-up three months later. The authors find that the assembly received considerable attention in the media, especially from left-leaning news outlets, and that the coverage was balanced in terms of positive and negative views on the assembly. While the media thereby played their expected role (Olausson, 2009) in making the key points of contention available to the wider public, they did mostly cover the outcomes of the assembly rather than its proceedings, resulting in a somewhat superficial coverage (consistent with Schafer and Schlichting's [2014] findings regarding news media coverage of environmental issues more generally). The authors also present preliminary findings on potential gender differences in how women journalists and men journalists reported on the assembly, with the former being generally more positive compared to the latter. Taken together, they start to open up the black box between a climate assembly and the 'maxi public,' making an important contribution to the debate about the transmission of climate assemblies' proceedings and recommendations to the citizenry at large (see Parkinson, 2023).

These three contributions offer significant insights into the role played by narratives in the communication of environmental issues. We demonstrated that

the ‘ecocide’ narrative resulted in political and public disputes, leading to the spread of counter-narratives, which eventually limited the enforcement of environmental policies in the Low Countries. What Marthe Walgrave’s study adds to this is the fact that the exact kinds of narratives citizens digest tend to go hand in hand with their climate attitudes and concomitant media diet. Wout Van Praet’s study adds that all narratives produced by Flemish political parties on their websites seem to legitimise climate actions (with Vlaams Belang as an exception), but this legitimising strategy seems to require limited use of emotional appeal. Emilien Paulis, Lisa Verhasselt and Raphaël Kies’ analysis of news coverage of a national climate assembly in Luxembourg also suggests that the media can potentially function as a reliable transmitter of balanced information about citizen-driven environmental politics. We can thus conclude that the contributions included in this Special Issue present valuable observations regarding (in-)effective political communication. Such observations may be particularly relevant to the communication related to one of the most pressing issues in today’s society: the climate and ecological crises.

Note

- 1 Translations produced by the authors.

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