



**Social Communication
Doctoral School**

THESIS BOOKLET

Csiszér Annamária

Lessons of a Public Consultation

PhD thesis

Supervisor

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CSc, dr. habil, associate professor

Budapest, 2016

Institute of Behavioural Science and Communication Theory

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1. Research History and Justification of Topic Choice

In parallel with my doctoral studies I started to work in the field of European development policy and policy communication. As I got more into depth in my doctoral research and in my professional life, the similarities underlying the practical and theoretical spheres became more and more obvious, therefore I decided to focus on both of them in my dissertation. What I got really interested in, is the social world, notably, the widely understood significance of communication that with its own dynamics, structures, systems and subsystems – and with the interrelations of these systems and their environment – construct and maintain society.

I have chosen a special field – the communicative perspective of the distribution of the 2014-2020 development funds, as I consider this topic – from communicational, social and economical perspective crucial for Hungary. According to my knowledge my research carried out in this theme is the first one from a social communication perspective. I consider my topic choice acute and relevant in the field of e-government, e-administration, and concerning the challenges of consultative politics. Emphasising trust as one of my key notions reflects on the loss of institutional trust characterizing the post-socialist countries of Europe in the years 2010.

Being derived from the paradoxical nature of the scientific discipline the concept of trust is a direct component of most social notion, which vision I intended to challenge with an alternative interpretation that can be applied as an operational manner for surveying trust in its empirical and social allocation, without disregarding questions of validity in real social aspects, where trust plays a direct or indirect role as the basis of most public interactions. In general I consider the phenomenon of trust as an important guideline in my writing, which I intend to emphasise both in the theoretical and practical part of my paper.

Both explicitly and implicitly the central role of my thesis is given to rational public deliberation, especially to its online form. I reckon the contemporary scientific discourse on publicity and public spheres as changing and developing views that have to be researched.

I have chosen to analyse public consultations because I see a governing logic behind the way they operate. This logic is derived from the idea of participatory democracy that lays behind the study of public sphere in which public opinion is transformed into political action.

Focusing on various levels and dimensions of identity beside the contribution of social psychology's social identity theory – that characterises individuals' identity as group members rather than a unique and distinctive individual I concentrate on the concept of society (made up of individuals) as an agora and also on the information and knowledge networks these societies are encompassed.

My theoretical background – proceeding from different theoretical bases from Habermas, through Dahlgren, to Jenkins – identifies several factors that have an effect on individual's opinion formation and on how these opinions are transformed into political decisions.

The significance of my topic choice is described by new communication possibilities arising in online space that have a role in political decision making, role which I plan to analyse through a practical example. The aim of my dissertation is to draw conclusions of the surveyed public consultation and to give further guideline to the realization of upcoming consultations.

2. Applied scientific methodology

The practical part of my dissertation is built up by a threefold research. The first and second part consists of the comparative analysis of two public consultations carried out in the topic of the distribution of the 2014-2020 development funds, more specifically I analysed the comments that the State Secretariat of Development Policy Communication received for the 8 Operational Programmes that dealt with cohesion funds.¹ The first consultation was carried out between 19 November and 16 December 2013, while the consultation being chosen as the second object of my analysis took place between 7-25 November 2014. (Both being available online at http://palyazat.gov.hu/2014_2020_as_operativ_programok_tarsadalmi_egyeztetese).

I opted for these two consultations, because they are the first and last one (so far) being carried out in this topic. The first one was executed before the submission of the Partnership Agreement to the European Commission (3rd March 2014) while the second one being accomplished after the revision of the Operational Programmes' texts and after the publication of 2 more Operational Programmes. Therefore I decided to make a comparative analysis of these two consultations, in order to observe, whether there was any variation between the communication strategies used, between the commenters' identities, and whether greater trust can there be traced between government bodies and publicly deliberating citizens.

The research in other words, is about citizen participation engendering in a free – free from any attached strings – dimension, about their relationship to the professional political sphere. The posts and comments written in relation to the 8 Operative Programmes, are analysed from the viewpoint regarding to what extent did the citizen comments constitute the context of political products.

My survey was accomplished with the help of discourse analysis that is a promising way of research used by scientists worldwide. I chose this method because it describes social actions through language in the most accurate way. According to Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell discourse analysts suggest the following:

- Language is used for a variety of functions and its use has a variety of consequences
- Language is both constructed and constructive
- The same phenomena can be described in a variety of ways

¹ In my dissertation I use the terms cohesion and development funds as synonyms.

- There will, therefore, be considerable variation in accounts
- There is, as yet, no foolproof way to deal with this variation and to shift accounts which are 'literal' or 'accurate' from those which are rhetorical or merely misguided thereby escaping the problems variation raises for researchers with a 'realistic' model of language [Potter & Wetherell 1987:36].

Political discourse analysis is a special field used to analyse and to focus on discourse in political forums (such as debates, speeches, hearings, consultations) as the phenomenon of interest. Political discourse is an informal exchange of reasoned views as to which several alternative courses of action should be taken to solve a societal problem [Johnson, 2000:27].

2.1. Justification of the choice of research methodology

The reason why I decided to use discourse analysis as a methodological tool for my research is due to the fact that this type of analysis can be applied to any piece of writing or recorded communication and it is currently used from media studies to rhetoric, cultural studies, political science, psychology and cognitive science and several other significant scientific disciplines. According to Berelson it can be used for gaining information with the following purpose: (1) reveal international differences in communication content; (2) demonstrate the occurrence of propaganda; (3) detect the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution; (4) elaborate on attitudinal and behavioral responses to communications; (5) decree psychological and emotional state of individuals and groups [adapted from Berelson, 1952:12].

From the two general categories – conceptual and relational – I relied on the latter one as a methodological concept of my research analysis. Conceptual analysis establishes the existence and frequency of concepts represented by words or phrases in a text. Relational analysis on the contrary, goes one step further by exploring the relationships among notions in a text, namely it focuses on meaningful relationships [Carley, 1992:67].

I carried out the discourse analysis based on its own logic and reflective element relying on Tracy-Mirivel's Discourse Analysis, which in a communication discipline involves four main activities. *The first activity is to audio-or videotape human interactions, the interaction that is*

taped occurs naturally in a social or institutional site. The second activity of Discourse Analysis is to make a transcript of selected segments of the taped interaction. A third activity in Discourse Analysis research, often referred to as having a data session, is for a small group of people to repeatedly listen to or view a tape of an interaction accompanied by a transcript, which is followed by group analysis. The fourth stage of Discourse Analysis is to develop a scholarly argument, where subtle observations and analytic points are brought into a larger frame. Reflecting on what has been observed in the discourse, a claim is developed. [Tracy-Mirivel, 2009: 160].

The above mentioned aspects of discourse analysis are true for verbal communication, but concerning reflections on emotional state or proximity between representative and represented I used analyses and interpretations.

Beside Tracy and Mirivel’s direction I took into consideration a 10-step discourse analysis logic set up by Chilton [2004] and Schneider [2013] which followed the steps of: 1. establishing a context; 2. exploring the production process; 3. preparing the material for analysis; 4. the coding process – through which characteristic features are assigned to specific units of analysis; 5. examining the structure of the text; 6. collecting and examining of discursive statements; 7. identifying of cultural references; 8. identifying of linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms; 9. data interpretation; 10. finally the presentation of findings

2.2. Specifying the research itself

In order to analyse the discussions being carried out in the first consultation phase from the data being at my disposal (relying on the previously mentioned webpage) I created a table (Table 1) with the name and number of received comments:

Name of the Operational Programme	Number of Received Comments
Hungarian Fisheries Operational Programme	36
Environmental and Energy Efficiency Operational Programme	202
Human Resource Development Operational	171

Programme	
Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme	186
Integrated Transport Development Operational Programme	93
Regional and Settlement Development Operational Programme	190
Competitive Central Hungary Operational Programme	92
Rural Development Operational Programme	121

Table 1: own resource

Table 2 shows the same data in regard to the second public consultation phase:

Name of the Operational Programme	Number of Received Comments
Hungarian Fisheries Operational Programme	3
Human Resource Development Operational Programme	23
Economic Development and Innovation Operational Programme	42
Integrated Transport Development Operational Programme	13
Regional and Settlement Development Operational Programme	34
Competitive Central Hungary Operational Programme	19
Rural Development Operational Programme	68

Table 2 own resource

For the analysis of the incoming comments I constructed 8 discourse analysis categories:

- expression of emotion;
- mentioning trust in connection with policy making institutions;
- reference to scientific resources, statistics;
- expressing own opinion;
- the application of encouraging expressions, the ones that encourage for taking action;
- comments referring to the social aspect of policy;
- emphasising own identity (personal benefit from an operational programme over its social benefit);
- expressions concerning respect vs. solidity (first of all in language usage, in connection to government bodies)

I also determined scales on which I have marked these categories: positive vs. negative; strong vs.weak; active vs. passive. I considered a concept positive, when it beared a positive connotation (eg.love, satisfaction), while I considered a notion negative when it referred to a negative connotation (eg: hate, dissatisfaction). The difference between strongness and weakness varried in context of the stress of the expressed opinion (whether it dominated the flow of discussion or not), and the determination of active or passive depended on the type of noun the commenter used (me vs. you, me vs. the government, me vs. the EU). Table 3 shows an extract of the applied methodology:

	Positive	Negative	Active	Passive	Strong	Weak
1.Expression of emotion						
2.Mentioning trust in connection with policy making institutions						

3.Reference to scientific resources, statistics						
4.Expressing own opinion						
5.The application of encouraging expressions, the ones that encourage for taking action						
6.Comments referring to the social aspect of policy						
7.To emphasise own identity						
8. Expressions concerning respect vs. solidity						

Table 3: own resource

Following the analysis of all the comments belonging to the eight Operational Programmes in both periods I made a comparative analysis of the two consultation processes, the result of which I will delineate in part 3 of my writing.

Following the discourse analysis process I compared the amount of individual commenters with that of the organizations and I was also curious about the extent to which the texts of the commented Operational Programmes have changed after the public consultation.

In the third part of my research as a back up survey I discussed the results of a qualitative interview research, in the framework of which semi-structured interviews were carried out with the preparatory team members of the public consultation (with all the 7 members who worked on the realization of this public deliberation), and also with 8 members among the participants (the commenters) of the public consultation. The commenters – as interview subjects – were selected with random sampling, and I tried to have at least one commenter among those that contributed to both phases of the consultation, and I also tried to have them from each Operational Programme.

The major aim of the qualitative interview research was to reassure or confute the results of my online analysis, moreover to find out whether the initial expectations of the preparatory team members have met the actual outcomes of the public consultation, whereas I was also interested in the role of online public consultation sphere in such a government and citizen relationship, where the probability of personal encounter is rather low. I stated that the possibility of public consultation, especially its online version has changed to a great extent the structure of social communication between represented and representative, and the relationship towards time and space.

Beside the threefolded research, or more precisely above and prior to them I set up four hypothesis that I planned to prove or confute as a principle aim of my dissertation. The four hypothesis were the following:

- I assume, that online consultations, provide a space for inclusive public deliberation.
- I assume, that online consultations generate and connect networks of interest or practice.
- I suppose, that online interaction between representatives and represented leads to greater trust between them.
- I suppose, that most online discussion is uniform and of poor quality.

I plan to evolve on the outcomes in part 3 of the present paper.

3. Main results of the dissertation

Since the topic of my dissertation proved to be among the first ones from a social communication perspective in the Hungarian academic sphere it can be considered as a new approach of political studies. The significance of my writing lies in its communicative aspect that can be detected throughout the dissertation.

The results of the comparative analysis of the two consultation processes show one discrepancy that lies in the outcome of the two public consultations that can be detected in the appreciably low amount of incoming comments, which at first impression implies the reduced interest in the opinion formation as such.

3.1. Result of the comparative analysis

According to the eight categories that I set up for my discourse analysis after the comparison of the two surveyed public consultations it can be asserted that expression of emotion (both negative and positive) has significantly been reduced (with almost 50%) in the second round, which means that the Operational Programmes' texts became more objective, more concrete, more professional, most of the reflected discrepancies have been eliminated, therefore commenters had a more neutral (emotion free) attitude towards them. The mentioning of trust is a recurring motive, in the second public consultation phase, first of all as a result of the better quality of the Operational Programmes' texts, and the amendment of the new texts with all the previous suggestions. Reference to scientific resource also shows a growing tendency, mainly due to the more and more professional level of comments, and the increasing amount of involvement of professional organizations, as a consequence of this expression of own opinion (opinion without any reference to the OP's priorities, or without any consideration of its specific content elements) shows a decreasing number.

Encouragement or call to take action shows no significant difference, (even some decrease can be traced) mainly because of the implementation of previously expressed public opinion. Comments focusing on the specific policy's social aspect signify a slight rise. Emphasis of own identity has fallen down to its half thanks to the bigger amount of involvement of professional organizations, and network of organizations. As the idioms expressing trust has increased respectful parlance has emerged, and reference to solidity has disappeared.

It can be concluded that expression of public opinion through public consultation has affected in a great deal the text of the Operational Programmes' final version. Policy makers incorporated contents in the texts that were initiated by the public, by this strengthening the view that public sphere functions as a controller of government decisions. It can also be stated that online consultation in general provides space for inclusive public deliberation. Moreover, online consultation generated networks of interest. As a result it facilitated greater trust between public and government representatives. The online discussion itself mirrored a high quality of deliberation through respectful parlance.

3.2. Results of the qualitative research

From the semi-structured interviews it turned out that the preparatory team members expected a lot more public activity, based on their initial calculations deduced from western-european best practices. *”We checked the amount of comments received for similar public consultations in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, and deduced a number that should be valid for Hungary on a proportional bases. That number, taking into account the number of inhabitants was approximately 10.000. The actual amount of received comments (the highest amount was 202, for Environmental and Energy Efficiency Operational Programme in the first round of the consultations) were far below our expectations”* (quotation from a preparatory team member²).

Despite the little activity, they were satisfied with the fact that commenters took their task seriously, gave valuable contribution, and all of the suggestions and ideas could be incorporated in the revised policy texts.

”We consider it as a success, however that citizens gave valuable comments, most of them concentrating on the priorities and the general scope of the document” (quotation from another preparatory team member).

They had a positive feeling about the growing trust and respect between them and the deliberating citizens, as a result of the online public consultation.

Based on the analysed interviews, it can be declared that individuals communicating online aim at abolishing distance.

Virtuality can be understood as such a space which has no physical expansivity, only symbolic. As a consequence of this we can talk about the notion of distance-presence, which refers to the presence of online-I presence. From this comes that there is also an offline I, so the I probably becomes doubled. The interviewed commenters reviewed that during the online consultation they intend to express themselves similarly to a personal face-to-face meeting, but in fact in online consultation situation the emphasis is rather on factual communication – research data, scientific findings – than on expression of emotions.

”Although I was very angry that my suggestion has not been implemented in the final version of the text after the first consultation process, although I find it a crucial element....it is very difficult to express anger in writing, in online communication, so I decided to support my view

² Quotations are own translations from the original Hungarian interview.

with scientific data... and polite opinion expression looks much better if they reread it, or anybody from the public, it matters the picture that I form about myself, through my comment' (quotation from an interviewed commenter – own translation).

Concluding the third phase of my research it can be declared that the qualitative interview has reassured the findings of the discourse analysis. The interviewed commenters felt that their opinion expression has transformed the texts' content to a great deal, their suggestions – underpinned by scientific research data – were incorporated into the specific Operational Programmes' final version.

By the end of the research it became clear that although we can talk about novelty from a technical viewpoint (the emergence of the Internet and all the cyber possibilities provided by it), but on social and social communication level despite the technological advances no radical changes have occurred compared to the social participation practices discussed by ancient Greek rhetoricians.

3.3. What was not included in my research

I did not intend to survey or summarize the outcomes of the 2007-2013 financial period, as I did not consider that data necessary to my present research. I neither planned to make a comparison between the two periods. I was especially curious about attitudes, ways of thinking, social and individual norms, value systems, emotional attitudes that influence the outcome of the surveyed consultations.

3.4. Possible future steps

The vested interest underlying the commenters and government organizations is worth further research. The different discursive positions in the analysed dimensions could provide interesting details concerning the possible interconnections of the actors of public sphere. It was not the scope of this writing to further elaborate on the quality of online deliberations – which served as my fourth hypothesis, but it can function as a useful future step. The additional development of the concept of participation, either along the axis of identity-trust-participation can also be regarded as future direction, along with the realization of an extended international comparative analysis in order to draw further conclusions of lessons of international public consultations as well.

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5. Own publications in the topic

BOOK, CHAPTER OR PART OF A BOOK IN HUNGARIAN

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