

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH CITIES

Dr. Isabel Ruiz-Mora, Dr. Antonio Castillo-Esparcia and MSc. María Belén Barroso

isabelruiz@uma.es, acastilloe@uma.es, mbelenbarroso@uma.es

University of Malaga, Spain



INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues have played a part in citizens' concerns and protests and these issues have played a greater role in political agendas (Levy and Zint, 2013; Dalton, Recchia and Rohrschneider, 2003). As result, grassroots community resistance emerged in response to practices, policies, and conditions that residents have judged to be unfair or illegal (Bullard and Johnson, 2000, p.557). Following the approach of issues management and environmental activism, and considering public relations as a social activity (Ihlen, Fredriksson & van Ruler, 2009), we will investigate if local governments are using issues management "to reduce friction and increase harmony between organisations and their publics" (Heath, 2005, p.460) and how public relations are empowering and engaging citizens to play an active role in their cities' destiny.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How city councils are dealing with environmental issues such as green spaces.
- How citizens use public relations strategies to influence local government's commitment to these concerns.

METHODOLOGY

- Case Study:** Urban Forest (Málaga, Spain) and Save our Trees (England, UK)
- Interpretative analysis:** communication techniques (social media, news and interviews).



Objective: to have an urban forest in a crowded suburb (177.000 m2) instead 4 skyscrapers and a big shopping mall

Public: local citizens, local media, local politicians

Strategies: <http://bosqueurbanomalaga.org/>

- RESULTS**
- Social media activism (proponent site, Change.org, Facebook, Twitter, own brand)
 - Media impact (press release, interviews, meeting with other parties, demonstrations, open meetings)
 - Allies with the opposition, academics, experts, NGO
 - Get involved citizens and local businesses (meetings and face to face contact)
 - Not legal action

Results:

- + 30.000 supporters
- + 1000 followers in social media
- Last plenary session (2nd Nov 2016) **the consult is legal!**
- Big demonstration (26-27th Nov 2016)
- Local business support (against shopping mall)

Objective: Save trees from a road maintenance programme by Sheffield City Council (SCC) to cut down thousands of trees

Public: local citizens, local media, national politicians

Strategies: <http://www.savesheffielddtrees.org.uk/>

- Retired actor Dave Dillner, has brought the claim on behalf of the Sheffield Trees Action Groups
- Social media activism (proponent site, Change.org, Facebook, Twitter, own brand, Sheffield Trees at Risk Map)
- Crowdfunding to support legal action (donations, online shop)
- Media impact (protest, news, interviews, demonstration)
- Allies with experts (independent panel to evaluate trees)
- Get involved citizens (actions in neighbourhood, protest camp)
- Results:** +2000 followers in Facebook, +1000 supporters
- Campaign to save Sheffield's trees has reached High Court in London (March, 2016) and to appeal in July → **They have lost!**
- SCC is sending a survey letter → to agree with the proposals of cut down or not trees in neighborhood
- SCC (insist) trees removed will be replaced
- 2 people were arrested for standing under a tree (3rd Nov 2016)

CONCLUSION

Lack of dialogue management in city councils and powerful use of lobbying strategies by citizens

- City councils are not using issues management to reduce friction and increase harmony between the local institution and their publics (Heath, 2005).
- Both councils have not fully consulted on the issue and have failed to follow proper procedures, such as assessing the environmental impact of their actions and considering citizens' opinion.
- Social media allow citizens to react when political decisions are considered negative for their welfare.
- The media and experts play the independent voice role (main allies).
- The public is pushing politicians to make public decisions on environmental issues and forcing the media and local institutions to pay attention to participation process for a real democracy.