



Choosing Sources Out Of Digital Landscape:

The Criteria Of Legitimacy And Of Authority Used By Journalists In The
“Black-out” Media Event Construction In Belgium

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General context of the research

- ▶ Part of a research supported by a grant of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)
 - ▶ Insight Development Grant led by Olivier TURBIDE (University of Quebec in Montreal, UQAM) and Nadège BROUSTAU (Free University of Brussels, ULB; UQAM)
 - ▶ « News event and information flow in the era of web 2.0: journalists, public relations professionals and citizens »
 - ▶ Focus on environmental controversies

▶ General goals of the main project

1. **Understanding the information flow between journalists, PR professionals and citizens in the social web context**
2. Exploring how actors use online medias to build and fix their public roles in the debate
3. Understanding how a public debate evolves throughout this flow

1. The Black-out media event in Belgium (2014-2019)

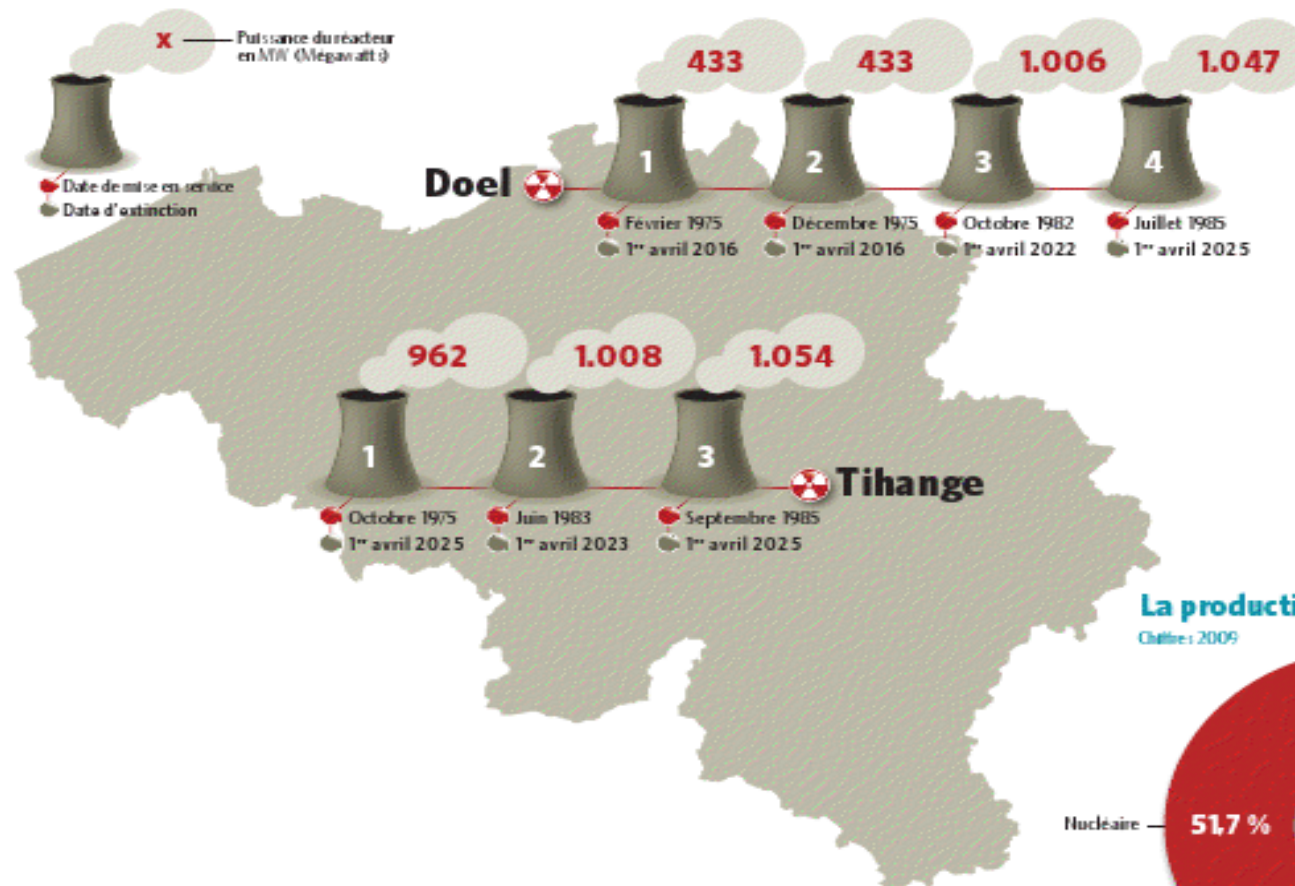
- ▶ **Nuclear phase-out** agreed in **1999** by the Belgian federal government
- ▶ First reactor should be shut down in **2015**
- ▶ In 2012 Decision of the federal government to **extend the life of the older reactors to 2025**
- ▶ In **2019 Belgian is still the 3d more nuclearized country in the world**



Tihange Nuclear power plant

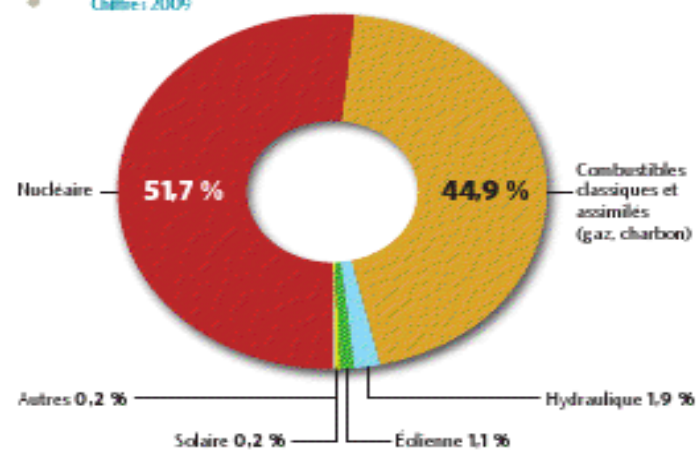
Le nucléaire en Belgique

Le Dailym - 09/03/12



La production belge d'électricité

Chiffre : 2009



Source: IWT Economie

1. The Black-out media event

- ▶ Problem: the 7 reactors are getting old...
- ▶ Like old cars, they regularly break down, or have to be stopped for maintenance.
- ▶ In winter 2012 “*microfissures*” (cracks) were discovered in two reactors -> stopped for verification in 2014.
- ▶ Since then, it is very common that one or several reactors are stopped.



Tihange Nuclear power plant

Le Soir Vendredi 12 octobre 2018 19

Jyrki Katainen, vice-président de la Commission européenne, a estimé jeudi qu'il n'est pas encore trop tard » pour élaborer un budget crédible en Italie.

ÉCONOMIE

Pénurie : la Belgique suspendue à un réacteur

ÉNERGIE Engie Electrabel s'apprête à éteindre Tihange 1 ce week-end

► Le réseau électrique est confronté à une situation inédite. ► Notre pays va devoir vivre pendant un mois avec un seul réacteur nucléaire sur sept.

Vous ne vous en rendez pas compte. Pourtant, dans la nuit de vendredi à samedi (à 01 h 00 du matin très précisément), Engie Electrabel va mettre le réacteur de Tihange 1 à l'arrêt, pour le recharger en combustible. Ce faisant, sur le parc

réseau électrique, c'est un travail de gestion quotidien. On ne doit pas adapter le réseau comme si c'était un accident, par exemple. Dans le cas présent, l'arrêt était programmé. On va chercher l'électricité sur une autre source de production ou à travers le marché via les importations.

« Vu la météo, la France ne devrait pas avoir une énorme charge de chauffage : on va pouvoir importer », note Damien Ernst, professeur à l'ULiège spécialiste de l'énergie. On pourrait doucement approcher des limites de saturation, mais logiquement, ça devrait passer. Ceci



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L'ECHO

Doté de solides commandes, IBA confirme son retour prochain à la rentabilité

Thyssenkrupp s'oppose au refus européen de sa fusion avec Tata

Le vendredi, c'est télétravail

La taxe qui supprimerait les embouteillages...

Les risques de black-out s'éloignent pour cet hiver

10 janvier 2019 00:00

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Since 2014, every winter, this situation led to the fear of a lack of electricity and a possible « black-out » event in Belgium.

This possible « black-out » has been extensively covered in national media outlet.



2. Research question

- ▶ How do journalists cover nuclear controversies and especially how do they get access to information about this possible « black-out »?
- ▶ What (digital) tools do they use to collect useful information on these very technical questions?
- ▶ Can we observe discourse transformation throughout the different interactions between communication professionals and journalists?

3. Why is this case interesting?

- ▶ Nuclear communication has been largely investigated
- ▶ **A communication turn after Tchernobyl** (1986)
- ▶ Creation of different global and national nuclear communication organisations
 - ▶ NucNet (The Independent Nuclear News Agency, 1991)
 - ▶ PIME Conference (« *THE* annual gathering point for professional nuclear communicators from around the world. » 1988)
 - ▶ ... many more
- ▶ **William Kinsella** about nuclear communication « [a] globalized system involving international transfers of knowledge, materials, technologies, people, and products » (Kinsella 2011, 84)
- ▶ **Invention of a particular rhetoric and vocabulary** (Kinsella, Catellani...)
- ▶ But almost no studies of how journalist and « gatekeepers » interact with nuclear communication professionals (Parotte and Lifs 2015).

3. Why is this case interesting: theoretical echos

- ▶ Sociology of journalism / Sociology of communication
- ▶ **Interactions between PR and journalism** (Broustau & Carignan, 2019; Broustau & Francoeur, 2017; Macnamara, 2016; Nienstedt & al., 2013; Curtin, 1999; O'Gandy, 1982)
 - ▶ Marqued by a strong, yet unequal interdependency
 - ▶ Dependency of journalists > dependency of PR professionals (employment rate, working conditions)
 - ▶ Ambiguous nature of the interactions (between coopetition, mistrust, complicity...)
 - ▶ Where selection of the sources of information / Information subsidies are based upon
 - ▶ **Newsworthiness, Legitimacy, Authority**
- ▶ **Transformation of the role and status of gatekeeper** (Ferreira, 2018; Broustau & Côté, 2014)
 - ▶ Bypass of traditional experts and information professionals via social medias
 - ▶ That can then draw the attention from mainstream medias

4. Methodology

- ▶ Phase 1 (2019): Interviews
 - ▶ With the 5 journalists specialised in energy policy in French speaking Belgium
 - ▶ With communication professionals within the different (anti-)nuclear organisations
- ▶ Also based on former interviews and observation realised in 2014 in the Belgian nuclear industry.
 - ▶ Participant observation in PIME conference and several international knowledge network about nuclear communication and citizen participation (FSC, NEA, H2020 projects), 32 interviews with nuclear actors in Belgium.

4. Methodology – Interview Grid

- ▶ Topic 1: Perception of the roles of the different categories of actors (academic expert, public experts, activists, industry worker...)
- ▶ Topic 2: On the particularity of nuclear policy for the media
- ▶ Topic 3: On the evolution of journalism in the social media age
- ▶ Topic 4: Perception of image construction strategy of the different actors of the controversy

5. Results – Mapping the actors

► **Several actors communicate about the black out**

- Public independent expert body
- Private company (owner of the reactors)
- Minister of Energy (M.-C. Marghem, federal government)
- Other politicians (energy commission of the Parliament)
- Environmental NGOs
- Anti-nuclear activists
- The Nuclear Forum (Common PR agency of the Belgian nuclear industry)
- Academic experts (especially one university prof.)



6. Results – More legitimate actors ?

- ▶ What are the privileged sources of information (in order of importance)
 1. Direct contact with people at CREG, ELIA, Academic expert (one phone call every week). Seen as good sources to get objective information
 2. Following the publication of the technical report published by CREG and ELIA
 3. Direct contact with minister cabinet members and member of the Parliament
 4. Following the debates in the energy commission of the Parliament.
 5. Press conference and occasional direct contact with ENGIE ELECTRABEL

- ▶ No or almost no contact with the FORUM NUCLEAR or anti-nuclear actors
 - ▶ Not seen as good sources, not neutral enough, too much propaganda oriented

6. Results – Using digital tools?

- ▶ Occasional use of Twitter

-> “to find information that I would have found otherwise anyway” (Journalist 1)

- ▶ Do not systematically watch FB and YouTube video produced by anti-nuclear actors
- ▶ Occasional use of LinkedIn

Digital tools are clearly not at the centre of their activity

Conclusion

- ▶ Contrasted conception of the institutional actors versus protest actors.
 - ▶ Very strong focus on rational contents vs disinterest in more emotional content (like anti-nuclear FB video).
 - ▶ Direct contact with trusted individuals within organisation seems to be at the center of their activity.
- ▶ Different kind of arguments (emotional vs rational) corresponding to different figures (concerned citizen vs expert, activist vs professional) are used by the different actors on different digital media (texts, videos, tweets) to interact with the journalists.
 - ▶ The legitimacy and the authority granted to the actors by the journalists seem to vary according to these different strategies **and the aim of communication perceived by the journalists** (neutral, technical info vs propaganda)

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