

DO YOU SPEAK DANUBIAN? **BREACHING NEW COMMUNICATION PATHS FOR PROMOTING THE WATER SECTOR IN THE DANUBE REGION?**

The Danube is actually the world's most international river, and to tackle climate change, water security, wastewater treatment and other similar challenges, we organize across an impossible number of language, cultural and political barriers and borders. Quite successfully, as a matter of fact. But is there room for further improvement? Can we extend our reach? Find new partners? And - do we have to? A panel of water networkers and communicators sat down in search of a common language to promote common goals.

Helene Masliah-Gilkarov, ICPDR Technical Expert on Public Participation & Communication, and IAWD Communication and Program Manager Katerina Schilling hosted an open roundtable format featuring water networkers and communication experts, asking the blunt question “Do you speak Danubian?” The answers varied wildly.

Full-time Danubians, part-time Danubians...

Jelena Janevska, Knowledge Manager of NALAS, understands “Danubian” as a multi-level field for exploration of issues, challenges, solutions, best practices, and also failures, because those carry important lessons. Jelena feels she is only partly speaking Danubian, because she and we all are still far from communicating with enough impact to set the necessary agenda for politics.

Carolyne Herten, Communication Officer at the EWA, also declares herself “still learning”, having only recently entered the water sector and being amazed at the huge diversity of themes and issues.

Vittorio Graziano, Junior Water Analyst at WAREG, occasionally speaks Danubian, because five nations of the Danube region are among the 25 European WAREG member nations.

Alexander Raffeiner, CEO of Raffeiner Reputation, does not dare to claim that he speaks Danubian, in spite of the fact that his agency has supported ICPDR since 2015. He defines his role as “complexity reducer”, and his task to translate expert language to create clarity, reach and impact.

...and Danubians in love.

Konstantin Ivanov, Global Water Partnership Regional Coordinator for Central and Eastern Europe, confesses that he even speaks WITH the Danube: He prepared for Danube Day 2021 by kajaking the river for nine solid days, meeting many different people along the way, curious to learn what makes them tick, what is bugging them, what problems they wrestle with. “I urge you all to spend time by the river. You will find space and time for contemplation there. It changes your perspective and clears your mind.”

Mr. Ivanov, formerly a journalist and communicator for environmental groups, looks at the many nations and capitals that the Danube connects. He advocates reaching out across borders, language barriers, even beyond the water sector community itself to agree, pursue and fulfill sustainability goals, and also to get the young generation on board. Climate change, floods and droughts touch everybody he says, and we are all in the same proverbial boat:

“You cannot manage a river without getting really everybody on board, because what happens upstream affects everybody downstream and vice versa.”

With this, the panel had arrived at the main issue: What does communication have to offer when it comes to promoting the water sector and creating new synergies with audiences?

Talking to ourselves?

Here, Jelena Janevska, would like to make a distinction between institutional and “real world” communication: “I’d like to see a paradigm shift”, she says.

“We need communication that stimulates participation and social change, messages that help people to develop an ownership of what they do.”

This applies to the water theme in general and also to the Danube region. Communication for development is institutionalized at NALAS. It is based on interpersonal communication, and takes an integrated approach. Working horizontally, it transports knowledge to those who need to make decisions, it encourages participation and includes those that are left out. That’s how it helps so set the political agenda, which is desperately needed.

Vittorio Graziano agrees, adding that communication is crucial to create synergies between the institutions working in the sector to reach their target audience. Although a lot of information on environmental topics is available, it is often messy and all over the place. He suggests regular exchanges between the different institutions to synchronize external communication with stakeholders and provide reliable resources to their audiences.

Konstantin Ivanov noted that to increase its reach, the sector has to break the habit of talking to themselves: “Communicating about the Danube works pretty much like everything else. Tell the target group why this topic matters, why it is relevant to listen, and what they are supposed to do afterwards: If we take good care of the Danube it will make everybody’s life easier. Don’t and bear the consequences. Climate, river basin management, social and economic issues – all are connected through the Danube, and we need to show people why this is relevant.”

To which Carolyn Herten adds that the “talking to themselves” often happens in hard-to-understand technical jargon, and though this habit is hard to break, augmenting the sector’s reach is impossible without clear, widely understandable communication.

“Indeed. We have to reduce complexity to reach many of the people that are important for what we do”,

assists Alexander Raffeiner.

And Konstantin Ivanov says: “Communication is about connecting the dots. We have to make sure people understand they own the process. Those responsible have to bear their responsibility, for action as well as inaction.”

Channels of our time – and time for the channels

Discussing possible channels for wide dissemination of messages in the digital age, the round inevitably wound up comparing notes on the role of social media. In this context, Jelena Janevska notes that many players in the sector are not investing enough into communication, constricting the available time to manage multiple social media channels:

“I appeal to all colleagues out there to take communication seriously and integrate it into everything you do. Make it part of your management, otherwise you cannot expect to get results!”

That said, all panelists found themselves on the same set of social media: Twitter, LinkedIn, Youtube, with the occasional Facebook thrown in. They also agreed on two things: That they were miles away from opening TikTok accounts for their organizations, and they suffered from constricted time budgets. In this context, Jelena Janevska recommends to focus by asking three questions:

“Ask who you are and pick media that fit you. Ask who your audiences are and send messages they can relate to. And thirdly, often neglected: How much time do you really have? Because you need to be there and keep your channel alive and post at least once a day.”