

# SUSTAINABILITY & MEDIA

Short essay : How the media has advanced the cause of sustainability through raising public awareness and address both the positive and negative effects of the media in promoting sustainability issues



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**Essay : how the media has advanced the cause of sustainability through raising public awareness and address both the positive and negative effects of the media in promoting sustainability issues**

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**“We have no longer a choice: either we adopt behaviours that respect sustainable development, either we stop polluting the environment, allow for renewal of natural resources and contribute to the improvement of the well-being of all, or sooner or later we sign our own death warrant.”** (Bird, E. et al., 2010, p55)

Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, made this warning for an urgent need of change for a sustainable future. Sustainability is a fairly new term that is not yet in our daily vocabulary and way of living as it should be.

It is through various media that we build our connection to the global world. The media has the power to influence the opinion, choices, and thereby the way of living of the people. As a result, the media has an important role to play in promoting the cause of sustainability to a larger public. Therefore, this essay will consider how the media deal with sustainability issues. Then, it will concentrate on both, the positive and negative effects the media has on promoting the cause of sustainability.

As this is a broad topic, the answer might change depending on the kind of media and the country, thus, this essay will concentrate on mass media like television, newspapers, radio or the internet in French speaking countries.

The media has an undeniable power to influence people, occupying an ever more important part in our lives. Sustainability is a rather vague term to many journalists. They will more easily use terms like ecology and environment; thereby forgetting or fail to communicate that sustainability includes three pillars, environment, social, and economy. The reason why the media and journalists struggle with the term of sustainability is because of the way they deal with the news is not adapted for the issue. Sustainability, as already mentioned doesn't stand for only the environment, but has a broader meaning including economy and social. But the journalists deal with the news in a fragmented way, depicting everything as single facts. Yet, to fully understand sustainability, it is important to see these exact same facts as related. This also brings contradictions in one single newspaper. At the economy section, there could be an article about the fact that the car market is good, selling really well. And a couple of pages later, at the environment section, there could be an article deploring the fact that the number of cars is raising too much, thus, helping polluting the environment even faster (Stégassy, 2012).

Also, the media often prefers to cover past, one-time events instead of long-term issues (ACIDD, 2007) and they are even more reluctant to cover topics related to the future. This results to the media covering environmental issues only, as single facts, representing it with pictures of natural catastrophes. This is the image that is given of sustainability to the public.

Furthermore, not only is the news fragmented, it also has to be rather quick to consume by the audience, often being shorten to fit a set format or length. This leads to an inevitable lack of in-depth research and analysis by the journalists, as the Quebecois journalist Francoeur regretfully states (Stégassy, 2012).

Smaller television channels or newspapers relatively have a bigger coverage of sustainability issues. Also, they deal with the subject in a more global way, for example, by combining subjects like economy and environment in a same reportage or article. Though, as the ACIDD (2007) noted, these sources of information are less popular by the public, and the audience and readers seem to decrease for such topics. Also, 4D (2008) pointed out that in general, the number of well-researched reportages and investigations is in constant decrease.

As a result, Francoeur says (Stégassy, 2012), that the present way of dealing with sustainability in the media causes the public to misunderstand the whole issue, missing on the most important aspect: global and multidisciplinary. The public will still get the single facts and news on the environment, but they won't be able to see the bigger picture if they rely only on the media, and more specifically the news, to get informed on sustainability issues. Even if the public decides, for example to watch more serious and in depth documentaries on sustainability, it is necessary to be careful not to take it as a single truth and research it more in depth with the help of other sources, as most of the people don't tend to do it.

In order to survive, it is important for the media to sell well, and the best way they found is by the use of sensationalism (Smith, 2011). Everything is more appealing if there is a dramatic edge or if it sounds out of the ordinary, or even phenomenal. Unfortunately, it creates an inevitable gap between the reality and what media promotes. In their attempt in raising public awareness on the climate change, the French channel "France 2" broadcasted four fictional documentaries on what would be a possible scenario if we keep living in a non-sustainable way. Sensationalism was the main ingredient of this catastrophic scenario. Also, the media seems to omit essential information when using sensationalism. Indeed, the important details like keeping the humus, the bees, plankton, etc., alive doesn't seem to be evoked in the news, though these are crucial, and yet endangered, component of life on Earth.

This has a really problematic consequence. Indeed, as most of the public is well aware of this phenomenon, it creates a lack of trust in what the public hears, reads or sees. The general believe is that the media is often, if not always, likely to exaggerate every published/ broadcasted news. Therefore, news related to sustainability, and more specifically bad news or warnings, like Koïchira Matsuura's are not seen to their real importance, or even stay unnoticed. In addition, if a show, article, subject etc., doesn't sell well, the people in charge will no longer publish / broadcast a similar topic. This doesn't help the cause of sustainability. So as to raise awareness, it would be helpful to continue making the less known or popular subjects a daily appearance in the news.

Another thing that is severely affecting the way media promotes the cause of sustainability is advertising. Here, there are two different issues concerning the ads.

On one hand there is the field of advertising that shows an ever more bigger interest in environment, for want of sustainability. Of course, the reason behind the fact that there is now very often some comment on how efficient a product is, or how its footprint is low, etc., could be questioned. The main purpose of an ad is still to sell, but it has a big effect on people. In fact, the consumers will, for many different reasons, prefer to opt for any product that advertises for a better environment.

On the other hand, the big companies that are everything but sustainable, have an inconsiderable power on the media, thus influencing the published news. These companies put a lot of money into advertising, thereby building a very strong image, no matter if it reflects reality or not. Therefore, the public could be miss-lead in thinking that a product of a company, or a company itself is sustainable, even though it is not. A recent event that occurred between the French newspaper “La Tribune” and the electricity company EDF illustrates it well (Féraud, 2011). EDF spends 200 000 € a year for advertising in the “La Tribune” (a small newspaper that struggles to survive). Recently, they published an article about the company, which didn’t please EDF. As a result, the company ended all advertising in that newspaper, causing its future to be uncertain.

An important aspect to understand how the media deals with sustainability, and how the public respond to it, is fear. Fear is both to be seen in journalists and in the public. For the journalists is it the fear to deal with a new subject, the fear of a reduction of the sales, the fear of the public’s response, etc. ACIDD (2007), after doing a survey on 6600 people, noticed that for the public, there were three big fears, the fear of global warming, the fear of getting a disease and the fear of losing the quality of life western cultures have. Nevertheless how good a journalist’s work is, it is really hard to promote a subject the public is not ready to hear about.

There is a multitude of ways that the media promotes the cause of sustainability, regardless if it is the “right” or “wrong” way. But no matter how the media proceed, the result of it will depend on how the public reacts to the news.

As for everything, the reaction of the public can be divided in two main attitudes. There is, on one hand, distrust towards the media. The public is so used in hearing bad news that warnings about something that might occur in the future seem meaningless. On the other hand, there is this constant presence of environmental issues, especially in advertising. This slowly brings people to think about it and go further to sustainability. Interestingly, the questions on sustainability seem to have a better audience in developing countries than in western cultures. Also, people will more likely to get active to help develop a sustainable way of living if they are directly affected with something bad, like a natural catastrophe. But a change is beginning to happen, as the ACIDD (2007) and Francoeur (Stégassy, 2012) are noticing, there is a tendency by the young people to look for other sources of information, the new possibilities in this field are nowadays helping a lot. And the young people are also, as it seems, more inclined to get active.

The subject of sustainability, or at least one of its pillars (environment) became more present in the media over the last few decades. On one hand there is an ever more growing interest in the matter but on the other hand the actual way of dealing with it in the media leaves the public with three main reactions; interest, distrust and fear. Sustainability, as a global issue, has not yet a meaningful part in the media, though environmental issues have. Media alone cannot promote the cause of sustainability and thereby raise public awareness, if there is not on the other hand an effort by the public to learn more about it. It needs work from both sides. The three pillars of sustainability, people, profit, planet, might not be enough. Some important people in this field say that a fourth “p” needs to be added, the pillar of pedagogy.

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[http://cloudinstitute.org/blog/2012/11/5/educating-for-sustainability-with-the-brain-in-mind.html?goback=.gde\\_112720\\_member\\_182783245](http://cloudinstitute.org/blog/2012/11/5/educating-for-sustainability-with-the-brain-in-mind.html?goback=.gde_112720_member_182783245)

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