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The environmental role of media can play in the Gulf

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The Environmental Role of Media in the Gulf

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of media in driving environmental initiatives in GCC countries. This research paper identifies the best practices of print, audio visual and social media in sustainability initiatives across different parts of the world and assesses their scope of applicability in the Gulf nations. Firstly, an important mile-stone in print media initiatives was taken by The Guardian Newspaper published in the UK, engaging in sustainability reporting by not advertising for cars and planes which emit CO₂ beyond the prescribed standards. Next, in the audio visual media a pertinent model will be that of B1 TV in Romania whose youth waste collection campaigns are popularized via radio. Thirdly, Social media has the benefit of low cost and rapid mass reach, a trend identified by the earth hour initiatives on Facebook where 400,000 people participated and even by commercial organizations who are using social media to launch their CSR initiatives such as General Electronics ‘tag your green picture’ on Flickr. Media houses in the Gulf have begun their journey down the green path but drastic and continuous involvement is needed to create the desired green culture in the Gulf and this could be done by adopting some of these best practices.

Key Words:

Environment, Gulf nations, print media, audio visual media, social media, sustainability

Introduction:

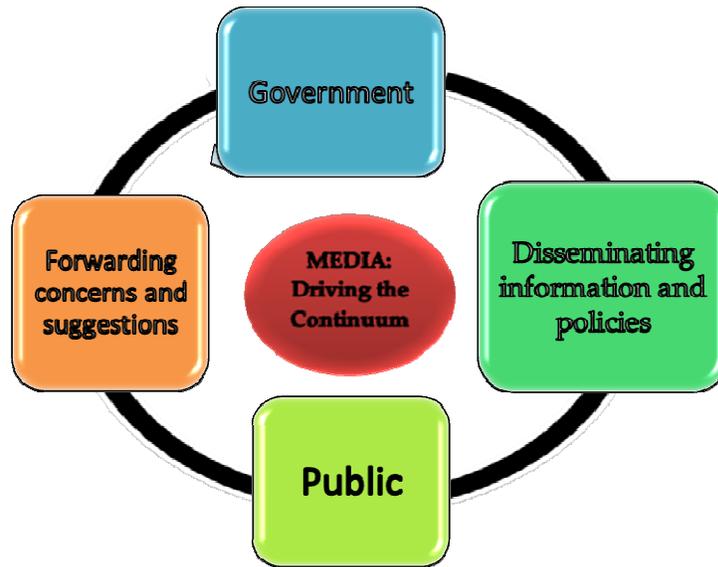
1.0 Media

Media with respect to communication is the name given to any form of storage or transmission channel that delivers information to the masses. (Dictionary.com, 2010) The most common type of media simmers down to the top three; Print media which includes newspapers, magazines and advertising. Next, is broadcast media which includes radio and television and finally social media such as blogs (blogger), social networking websites (Facebook), and micro blogging websites (twitter).

1.1 Role of Media towards the Environment

Over the years, the role of Media has leaned towards educating and creating awareness about the environmental challenges we face today. However, according to Dr. Mohammed Raouf, the project manager at Gulf Research Centre, media has two roles to play; the first involves communicating environmental policies and regulations to the public and the second is to channel back public concerns to the government who then creates appropriate policies. (Raouf, 2010)

In a broader sense there is a continuum in terms of the flow of information from the public to the government and vice versa. And so, in essence the role of media is to drive this continuum between the two entities with the aim of educating, creating awareness and generating sustainable initiatives to protect our planet.



1.2 Media in the Gulf:

The overview of media in the Gulf region focuses on the countries that are part of the Gulf Co-operation Council (G.C.C.) which include: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, U.A.E and Oman. This particular region has encountered several environmental issues including desertification, biodiversity loss, pollution in marine and coastal areas, high carbon emissions, air pollution and water scarcity and quality issues (MEI, 2008). As a result, media entities have a sizeable role to play in order to combat these issues. A glance at some of the environment related initiatives by media companies leads to few examples. When it comes to print media, most publications have an environment pro policy and publish environment related news daily and feature them in supplements as well. However there are some initiatives that lead as examples; these include: Gulf news “go-green” campaign which involved delivering eco-friendly jute-bags to loyal readers as a way to show their commitment to the environment (Gulf News, 2008). On the other hand Khaleej times, joined hands with NGO WWF-UAE as a corporate partner and regularly participate in their programs, and offers the NGO free advertising (De Roy, 2005). Another great milestone, was the recent publication of the National Geographic “Earth Pusle” report in Arabic (WWF, 2010) .

Moving towards broadcast media, CNBC Arabiya launched the *Bil Akhdar*, “Green Business” program that addresses environmental issues impacting the business world, green industry, new sustainable initiatives and companies spearheading the green movement. The show also broadcasts details about environmental legislation and guidelines and offers advice to companies seeking to make their business more eco-friendly. (Zawya, 2008)

A more creative initiative is that of the various media teams and government agencies involved in producing the UAE ecological footprint animation as part of the Al Basama Al Beeiya project. The paper animation proved entertaining and still served the message on the dangers of UAE ecological footprint and possible measures to reduce it. (Kippreport, 2010) The ad was received well mostly due to its creative nature which lacks in most environmental reporting/journalism and also its ability to reach out to adults and children. The team that produced the ad included AYA ad agency, Ministry of Environment and Water, the Abu Dhabi Global Environment Data Initiative (AGEDI), and the Global Footprint Network (GFN) in collaboration with WWF UAE; Youtube.com was used as the medium to share the advert. (PSFK, 2010)

2.0 Print Media:

Print Media is the medium that disseminates printed matter (Dictionary.com) to the masses. According to a ‘Statistical Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries’ survey, 4643 news papers and magazines were published in 2006 (SESRIC, n.d.). The wide reach and effectiveness of print media enables it to play a vital role in the environment. It is ironical how politics and entertainment precede the focus on environment. For example the Copenhagen Summit that took place in December 2009. This summit had a carbon footprint larger than most small countries. More than 40,000 tons of carbon entered the atmosphere as a consequence of the conference, with most coming from transportation. Leaders and officials flew in about 140 private jets to the summit, and had travelled in approximately 1, 200 gas-guzzling

limos while there. This eye opening information would not have been known to the world if it was not for the amazing capability and the extensive reporting done by the media themselves (Hybrid Cars, 2009).

An interesting case study is The Guardian, United Kingdom’s most widely read newspaper and oldest Sunday newspaper in the world. The paper was founded in 1791 by WS Bourne and is now considering adopting the sustainability reporting as a part of its Green Ad Network (The Guardian, 2010). The campaign addresses the irony where the print editorials tell people to reduce their impact on the planet, but the advertising urges people to consume more. We propose print media in the gulf must draw the line on advertisements they carry and avoid advertising to sell gas-guzzling cars and carbon-intensive flights. The Green Ad Network discusses the role advertising can play in “building a more sustainable future” and if to a certain extent newspaper’s could restrict the advertisements they carry (The Guardian, 2010).

The proposal being reviewed by The Guardian in its first stage calls to drop ads for cars which produce more than 150g of CO₂/km, and to drop direct advertising for flights, on the grounds that both these products cause unequivocal and unnecessary harm to the environment. The newspaper is weighing the revenue loss it might face given that it accounts for three quarters of the newspaper’s income. In the UAE, they could be similar introductions in print media one of them even being the introduction of ‘Green Collar’ jobs, employees journalists who exclusively research on pressing ecological issues and print then in the newspaper or in accompanied sponsored supplements (The Guardian, 2010) .

Given the vital need to combat climate change and other key issues such as water scarcity and the loss of biodiversity, The Gulf media could also create a team of dedicated environmental journalists promoting “Green Collar” jobs and dedicated professional’s to play environment roles. The Environmentguardian.co.uk was the world's most popular green website in September 2009 (The Guardian, 2010). The media in the gulf could also introduce an environment supplement and organize conferences on environment and social issues including climate change, adaptation,

sustainable housing and building schools for the future that highlight emerging principles like LEED etc. These supplements would be an important source of revenue and also serve as a tool that allows the print media to explore, in more depth than editorial budgets would otherwise allow, topics that are of interest to readers. Environment-related supplements at The Guardian included Greener Schools: What role should sustainability play in teaching, in association with the British Gas Generation Green program, and Flood Alert: How Britain is coping with a wetter climate?

In conversation with the editorial board of Khaleej Times, we had proposed an idea that if the print media in the U.A.E was given a similar opportunity as the Guardian in the U.K. to advertise only the products of those organizations which are environmentally sound would they consider taking up such a task? Surprisingly, the reaction was extremely positive towards the topic. Keeping in mind the financial and economic loss they would have to face, they believed that if the government would be ready to compensate the establishment with an incentive for taking up such a task then they would be more than willing to do so.

The sustainability reporting campaign could be supported with enlightening educative initiative's from the print media that enables marketer's to prepare an environmentally focused campaign to determine not only who to speak to and where to talk to them, but also what to say and how to say it; ultimately developing an in-depth understanding of ethical consumerism that can be used to inform both in the creative process and as a basis for planning and buying relevant media.

A similar program the UK newspapers carry is called “Green Light” and in 2008 The Guardian's Green Light was shared with more than 500 media planners, buyers, researchers, creative's, corporate social responsibility professionals and client-side marketing teams from companies, including Unilever, Coca-Cola and Honda. Ten of the UK's top media agencies have already integrated Green Light into their collection of planning tools and are actively using it. (The Guardian, 2010).

While researching for this paper around 40 sites of newspapers in different parts of the world were visited and the guardian was the only one with an Environment segment. Websites of newspapers in the Gulf could at the least (and must certainly) have an online editorial dedicated to environmental issues, to demonstrate the concern and involvement it making our earth a greener planet, reinforcing the governments initiatives such as IRENA and Masdar. We go on to suggest that the media open up a dedicated SBU – Sustainable Business Unit that can focus on its environmental role and market the Gulf’s ethical Investments in the environment.

On an operational front, the Guardian Professional events team has put in place new procedures to reduce the environmental impact of events by sourcing materials with strong green credentials. This includes using 100% recycled paper for all communications, pencils made from recycled CD cases, carbon-neutral beer and biodegradable events bags made of natural jute. The innovative Green Ad Network, launched in 2007 of the Guardian, has grown to include 75 green websites and 110 partner sites, and a Diversity Ad Network has now been added (The Guardian, 2010).

3.0 Environmental role of broadcasting (Audio/Visual):

The Mass Media, namely the Television and Radio – has always enjoyed the privilege to entice the masses and influence to an extent their way of life. At such a powerful position, the Media should be free from any sort of bias or prejudice. This furthers the Role of Media as an Umbrella for reporting various activities – Good or Bad in the society we live. Television and Radio can play a vital role in reporting Environmental Developments and issues. They are powerful tools that can create the real picture for the audience to see and hear about the various environmental issues, which are of utmost important to our ecology.

Television channels such as CNBC Arabia and National Geographic have sowed the seeds of environmental reporting in the region. Although, the region lacks indigenous environmental reporting, efforts have been made in the past through CNBC’s Bil Akhdar

(green business) to promote and highlight environmentally friendly or businesses that comply with environmentally sustainable movements. This show aimed to highlight the green movement in the industry.

Another great initiative was taken by B1 TV in Romania, who partners with the local Ministry of Environmental & Sustainable Development to promote and coordinate the Ministry's efforts of collecting electronic waste throughout the country (News corporation Ongoing Initiatives, 2010). The B1 TV waste collection initiatives also focus on youth involvement in addressing environmental issues. On the other hand, Radio, mostly community Radio, has played a very significant role in various parts of the world. In particular, Environment Cycle Radio F.M. 104.2 MHZ, Nepal, has helped the region's youth to be aware of the environmental hazards caused due to pollution and environment degradation in the Himalayan Mountain Ranges.

In California an initiative by Steve Curwood's Living on Earth a weekly environmental news and information program is distributed by Public Radio International to over more than 300 Public Radio Stations that feature a broad range of ecological issues (Living on Earth, 2010). Fox entertainment also claims to have built its entire operations with sustainability in focus and terms their commitment as 'Green It – Mean It' (News Corporation, 2010). Television and Radio needs to influence the masses in a way that they perceive environmental sustainability as a process of enrichment rather than wait till disaster happens and cope up with the thrill of panic.

4.0 Social Media:

The advent of the internet and social media has paved new avenues to tap the potential of media in spreading environmental awareness and instituting change. Social media can be entrusted with the ever crucial role of breeding a culture of environmental responsibility among the masses since its access is widespread, costs minimal and timeliness high.

This digital age has witnessed numerous successful social campaigns at a global level, targeted at environmental preservation. The phenomenal success of the Earth Hour in 2010, which became the largest social movement in history (WWF, 2010), with over a billion people from over 128 different countries turning off their lights for an hour, could partly be attributed to the extensive social media used. Social networking site Facebook alone had over 75 fan-pages dedicated to this event, each catering to a specific geographic region, with over 400,000 confirmed attendants for the main page. In addition, the official website of Earth Hour featured Earth Connect, a social networking application developed in collaboration with Google, to help spread the word through blogging. Google developers commented that through this, the Earth Hour movement will be sustained well beyond the March 28 event, providing a platform for people to share and contribute their thoughts on climate change (Google, 2009).

The Tag Your Green photo project launched by General Electrics is yet another glorious example of how corporate social responsibility could effectively be combined with environmental awareness. As part of this campaign, GE will make a donation every time a user uploads a photo of wind, water, or light to Flickr. For every wind photo, 4.5 kilowatt hours of wind energy will be donated to Practical Action; every water photo will trigger a donation of 480 gallons to Charity Water; and every light photo will yield 175 hours of solar power to d.light Lighting Oecusse Project (General Electrics Company, 2010). GE hopes the project will inspire people to share new "green" ideas and connect with others by watching, commenting and uploading photos and videos on Flickr and YouTube.

Computer based video-games are also increasingly beginning to emulate the role initially portrayed by social networking websites. Such video games could play an extremely vital role, since they appeal to a very broad target segment. Many environmental agencies have begun harnessing the potential such portals offer. For instance, CO2Fx funded by the National Science Foundation, is a web based multi-user

educational game which explores the relationship of global warming to economic, political and science policy decisions. The game is driven by a systems dynamics model and has been instrumental in raising awareness among high school students (Global Warming Interactive, n.d).

The role of social media in the Gulf region cannot be over-emphasized, as this is a heavily networked zone. Statistics reported by the Miniwatts Marketing Group in 2009 reported that internet users in the Middle East constitute 3.3% of the world population of internet users. Further, the penetration of the internet in the Middle East is 28.3%, a statistic which is slightly higher than the global penetration of 25.5% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2009). These figures reflect strong growth opportunities that should be capitalized on. At a local level, environmental initiatives like the Your Decision Campaign launched by the DEWA, stand to gain immensely from the heightened momentum social media could provide it with.

5.0 Conclusion:

Media in the Gulf region has a significant role to play towards protecting the environment, not only as a precautionary tool but also as a source of corrective solutions and a monitoring tool. This role is not an easy one to play, as issues of bi-lingual readership, growing research requirements, lack of reader interest and limited resources constantly increase the difficulty in reporting. However, with government support, technological advancements and a growing global concern for the environment as building blocks, Media will evolve with more power to influence the change needed for our environment to survive and rebuild itself.

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