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Media And Sustainable Devt: Testing The Media Agenda

We are at a turning point in the development of our global civilisation. It is hard for people to recognise this, caught up in patterns, routines and expectations which are the products of an outmoded economic theory of limitless consumption. Is it not time that the media administer to themselves the test of sustainability? Can media practitioners and managers act in concert to develop an agenda of their own to help bring about sustainable lifestyles? Or, are the media merely captive players in an economic machine, with no choice but to feed this consumerist frenzy that seems to be spiralling out of control.

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Sustainable development is an imperative for our civilisation, yet the mass media are failing in their duty to promote this objective. Instead they appear to be collaborating with commercial interests bent on pushing the planet closer and faster towards the doom threatened by unsustainable growth and its corollary: environmental destruction.

Most people are familiar with the term sustainable development, certainly those who have an academic background or are familiar with the work of the United Nations. But I wonder how many recognise the diverse implications that this term has for their lives and their activities?

Sustainable development is a theory, a process, and an imperative. As a theory, sustainable development recognizes that we are living on a finite planet with finite resources. It recognizes that the planet's natural systems have achieved a certain equilibrium over millions of years that has allowed the human species to grow and prosper to a level of some six billion individuals, and to dominate the life of the planet. It recognises that the finite nature of Earth imposes limits that human economic activity cannot exceed. As a process, sustainable development tries to identify all the ecologically destructive activities of humankind and to minimise or eliminate them. At the same time,

it strives to promote activities that will preserve and enhance our living environment and that will enhance the lives of all the Earth's people.

Sustainable development is an imperative because it has now been recognised that humankind, through population and economic growth, is making excessive demands on the world's natural systems. If natural systems are seriously destabilized, as we are now beginning to experience with the world's climate system through human-induced global warming, ecological disaster and social strife will be the likely result.

Measures to bring about sustainable development are presently the subject of continuing global negotiations that were initiated or given momentum by the historic Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. It may be a few years or more before significant measures emerge, but the next 25 years promise major changes in how economies are run, and in how the media reflect the new imperatives of sustainable development. For the media, unsustainable consumption is the key issue.

Here is a quote from James Gustave Spaeth, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, speaking at a policy workshop, "Towards the Goals of a Sustainable Society", in Seoul: ¹

"Our current patterns of production and consumption are not sustainable. With reckless abandon, we are rapidly depleting our natural resources and polluting our air and water. As a result, skies once blue are now brown. Water once pure is now unsafe, often, even for industrial purposes. Deforestation and desertification continue to spread, and species continue to disappear at alarming rates. But the downward environmental spiral stemming from current production and consumption patterns can be reversed. Change is possible. It's feasible. And it's necessary. Indeed, some form of change is inevitable. So we can either choose to take the high road and manage the change now, or we can pursue business as usual and have the change forced upon us later as our natural resources become depleted and Earth's fragile balance is permanently disrupted."

As more information comes to hand about the scope of the climatic changes we are facing, the magnitude of the task of achiev-

ing sustainable development becomes more apparent. Here is an observation from Claude Fussler, a senior executive in the multinational Dow Chemical Company, in a recent interview with London-based environmental journalist Geoffrey Lean : ²

"Developed countries will have to cut their use of energy and other raw materials - and their impact on the environment - more than 10 times over in little more than a generation, if the needs of the world's growing population are to be met without destroying the planet."

Lean comments: "This stark conclusion might seem radical enough coming from a deep green environmental group. Remarkably, it comes from a report by a business-led group of leading industrialists, government officials and academics from the world's richest countries." ³

Fussler says: "The technology and consumption models of developed countries have become the problem rather than the solution... The individual today needs an absurd share of natural resources for residence, mobility, infrastructure and cleaning or flushing everything he makes or owns."

Let's go on a tour to see what the media are up to. Here we are in the automobile showroom. We are looking at the latest model in prestige automobiles. What a sleek design! It can accelerate from zero to 100 kilometres per hour in just six seconds! Its internal auxiliary features are controlled by a voice-activated computer!

And who is this in the front seat? Why, it's Miss Universe! The camera zooms in. The door of the car opens and a pair of long, smooth legs emerges. Next comes a short, tight, and shimmering designer-dress. Miss Universe raises her head, flutters her heavily made-up eye lashes, and pouts her over-painted lips.

She whispers: "Don't buy this ostentatious piece of junk. The streets of our city are already jammed up with polluting automobiles. All this pollution just makes people sick and contributes to global warming. Do your inflated ego a favour and take public transport instead ..."

Now, the scene changes. We're at the world skateboarding championships: A big crowd, lots of noise and anticipation. And, here he is, that teenage wonder, the world skateboarding champion, Chung Wei Ming. ⁴ The camera zooms in. Chung skates up the ramp, flies into the air and does a magnificent double somersault. The crowd cheers. Then, the camera cuts to a beautiful, smiling teenage girl in the crowd. She's holding a can

of Cola. She tosses it and it appears in midair in front of Chung. He grabs it... and executes a perfect landing on the ramp. He smiles... the camera zooms in.

"Hey, kids... Don't buy this trash," he says. "It's full of sugar that will rot your teeth and make you fat. If you consume enough of this kind of junk, you can get problems like diabetes and heart disease and lose years off your life." Chung throws the soft-drink can into a garbage bin, and skates away.

Of course, you cannot see on the electronic mass media what I have just described. These advertising spots don't exist. As we all know, we are getting the opposite message hour after hour, day after day. That is what leads me to ask, are the media part of the problem or part of the solution?

Are the media, on balance, tuned into promoting sustainable consumption and sustainable development? I am afraid I must say, they are not. The media are part of the problem. When I can see million-dollar advertisements like the ones I have described, promoting ecological honesty, health, and social responsibility, I will say, "now the planet really has a chance". But who would pay one million dollars to produce and air such messages?

In many Asia and the Pacific countries, government health units are lucky to have half that amount for health promotion activities throughout their whole country. The automobile companies and the soft drink companies can afford one thousand times that much, and more, in one year. The beauty of their position is that it is their customers - we may say, their victims - who pay for the companies' huge advertising budgets with each item they buy.

We can see that most cities of Asia are becoming clogged up with petrol-burning vehicles and horrendous pollution problems are resulting. In Bangkok, people are fainting in the streets, overcome by pollution, and have to be carried to hospital.⁵ Yet the media continue to bombard us with images of the consuming individual, happily driving his car or motorcycle, amongst the blue skies and leafy trees, oblivious to any social or environmental responsibility.

What comes across in these consumerist messages is the appeal to indulge yourself: look good, feel good, enjoy the taste, discover the satisfaction. In other words, happiness can be yours if only you will buy, buy and buy our products. Can societies, hooked on this consumerist addiction, willingly change their behaviours en masse?

What If Global Warming Continues

The world's eminent scientists, working within the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in their second assessment report on global warming last year, said that atmospheric greenhouse gas and particle concentrations are increasing, largely because of human activities. If nothing is done, they said, global temperature would rise by an average of two degrees Celcius, and average sea level by 50 centimetres by 2100. Island nations such as Singapore, and every country with concentrations of population along its coastline, must be worried. The scientists have now called for a reduction of emissions of CO₂, to prevent global warming. So far, governments have balked at taking strong measures to significantly reduce CO₂ emissions. Cars and other petrol-burning vehicles are one of the major sources of CO₂ emissions.

This issue is the subject of negotiations within the Framework Convention on Climate Change which are proceeding at present in a painstaking and comprehensive way. They are dealing with such questions as environmental equity on a global basis, technology transfer, and economic exemptions for developing countries. The negotiations are very likely to agree to a drastic reduction in emissions from petrol-burning vehicles on a global basis; which would mean a reduction in numbers of these vehicles, not an increase, as the auto-making industry now assumes. Could governments then also require the media to comply?

Try this one on for size: Governments ban all advertising of cars, motorcycles -- all fossil-fuel burning vehicles. Instead they place an environmental tax on these products equalling or exceeding the amount they previously spent on advertising. Then the message of Miss Universe I described earlier could become reality, and the media could claim to be supporting sustainable development.

This scenario is not far-fetched, according to the expressions of serious concern by countries in the European Union, the USA and Japan this year in the global warming negotiations. It is an example of how the ecological imperative of sustainable development will increasingly lead us to review our concepts about the role of the media.

Public sentiment is turning against cars in the West, especially in congested and polluted European cities. Not so in developing Asia, where it's still business-as-usual despite growing congestion, as industrialists and governments are rushing to "catch up" with the developed countries in auto production. The media

pander to this aura of vanity and self-indulgence surrounding automobiles purely for commercial reasons. Do they have to? There are clear reasons for governments and the media themselves to act now, to help break this consumer addiction.

Unsustainable consumption assessed at the global level arises from unsustainable lifestyles at the individual level. It has now become a matter of global urgency to define and propagate sustainable consumption. This leads to the assertion that a sustainable lifestyle will also be a healthy lifestyle: healthy for the planet and healthy for the individual. It may come as no surprise that the media are guilty of promoting unhealthy lifestyles, just as they are guilty of promoting unsustainable lifestyles.

Back at the world skateboarding championships, our teenage wonder was quite right when he linked consumption of junk food - food high in fat or sugar, and highly-processed food rather than food high in fibre - as causing a whole range of potentially fatal health problems. In Asia and the Pacific, epidemics of the so-called "lifestyle diseases", arising from overnutrition, poor diet and lack of exercise, are rapidly on the rise, spurred on by self-indulgent lifestyles depicted through the electronic media. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised this growing problem of lifestyle diseases; it is up to us to recognise the media's role in it.

In Fiji, diet-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer are increasingly becoming major causes of premature mortality. Diabetes mellitus is responsible for six percent of all deaths in Fiji and for nine percent of those over 40 years old. In New Caledonia, about 40 percent of the population is overweight. In the capital Noumea, the prevalence rate for diabetes is 10.3 percent for males and 13.2 percent for females.

In Australia, 41 percent of adult men and 23 percent of women have been found to be overweight, according to WHO. Current estimates in Australia attribute 52 percent of all deaths in females and 62 percent of all deaths in males to nutrition-related diseases.

Singapore, with its assiduous government-sponsored health campaigns, has not escaped this problem. From being virtually unknown in schoolchildren, obesity ranks as the second most common health problem, WHO reported in 1993. Obesity affected about 13 percent of children aged six to 16, and was most prevalent in the higher socioeconomic class. From 1980 to 1990, diabetes

Materialism And Mental Health

mellitus increased in prevalence from 2.0 percent to 4.7 percent in Singapore.

There is a deeper aspect to this question of health, consumption and the media. Are we really promoting basic mental health of the population with this consumerist, materialistic philosophy which so dominates the mass media? Where, ultimately, is this self-indulgent frenzy -- to make ever more money, to accumulate ever more material goods, and to assume that these enhance one's social status -- leading us? Health officials in Thailand describe it as a mental illness, and have coined the term "status sickness" to describe it. This illness occurs as people continually strive to look better than others, says a mental health profile produced by the Health Ministry. Sufferers from status sickness pursued luxury consumption and became selfish. Their main aim was to seek benefits for themselves, and more people tried to take advantage of society through dishonesty, says the profile.

Prof. Prawase Wasi, a leading quality-of-life advocate in Thailand, had this to say about status sickness: ⁶ "Thais are too materialistic; they like to show off. They want more cars, thinking that it is a sign of success, of development. But, when a society is developed, people want to use less... They want to use bicycles and public transportation... "You can see [this status sickness] when children go to school ... If the children do not go in cars, they feel ashamed. Then, the car must have air conditioning. They will put the windows up in the car, even when they don't have airconditioning [to create the appearance of airconditioning]." This form of mental illness is not limited to Thailand. Status sickness is reinforced by the commercial entertainment media. It is certainly contrary to the concept of sustainable lifestyles, and a harmonious society.

Challenges For The Media

We are at a turning point in the development of our global civilisation. It is hard for people to recognise this, caught up in patterns, routines and expectations which are the products of an outmoded economic theory of limitless consumption. Is it not time that the media administer to themselves the test of sustainability? Can media practitioners and managers act in concert to develop an agenda of their own to help bring about sustainable lifestyles? Or, are the media merely captive players in an economic machine, with no choice but to feed this consumerist frenzy that seems to be spiralling out of control?

Progress in this massive shift to sustainability is taking place in other sectors, and at the policy level through global negotiations. Parallel to the climate change negotiations, we have the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), set up following the 1992 Earth Summit. So far, the CSD has hardly touched on the role of the media in the quest for sustainable development. Under the spotlight has been supply-side management: efforts for cleaner production processes, sustainable resource use and disposal, development and transfer of environmental technology, improvement of energy and materials efficiency, the banning or controlling of hazardous substances, among others. The movement towards eco-labelling of products is growing, and has become an issue of debate within the new World Trade Organisation.

The International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) has introduced the ISO 14000 environmental management standards, and business around the world is responding favourably to this. Promotion of the polluter-pays principle is gaining support. Business is gradually cleaning up its act, although there is much left to be done and the question of sustainable resource use still looms.

But what have media managers and those within the media culture done to acknowledge sustainable development? News programmes report regularly on environmental items. Features and documentaries on the environment are more numerous, and satellite news channels have come up with "infomercial" items such as Earth File and Earth Matters. But the need to promote lifestyle changes is far from being a priority concern. Can the media devise their own standards for sustainability?

Now, attention within the two previously mentioned bodies of the United Nations has turned more towards demand-side management. The question of lifestyle changes away from consumption-oriented lifestyles is on the agenda, but has hardly been translated into substance. The role of the media has hardly been raised. The fourth session of the CSD, which ended in early May, had this to say about changing production and consumption patterns:⁷

"Policy-makers' interest in applying demand side measures to change production and consumption patterns raises questions regarding the effectiveness and legitimacy of government action to influence people's aspirations and lifestyles ..."

On information and education, it said: "Many advocates of sustainable consumption maintain that significant shifts in

production and consumption patterns cannot be achieved without a far-reaching change in public attitudes and aspirations - a re-orientation of peoples' views about material wealth, the environment and quality of life. However, it is recognised that very little is known about the sociological aspects of consumer behaviour: the cultural, ethical and other non-economic factors which contribute to purchasing and behavioural decisions."

In my interpretation, these passages roughly translate into: "We don't know what to do." In the spirit of constructing a sustainable future for the planet, can we as policy makers, media managers and teachers begin to fill this vacuum by systematically identifying the negative elements of unsustainable lifestyles depicted in the media? Can we integrate this newly-recognised need to promote sustainable lifestyles into all aspects of the media, from entertainment to commercial advertising and to news reporting? There is a lot of work to be done.

Conclusion: Warning From Japan

For my conclusion, I want to draw on a report issued by Japan's Environment Agency last December.⁸ It warns that some of the Earth's ancient civilisations collapsed because they destabilized the environments that sustained them, without understanding what they were doing. Now that our present global civilization has begun to destabilize the global climate can we grasp the significance of it and react in time?

The Environment Agency said: "Historically, civilisations developed by expanding their utilisation of the environment. Given this well established precedent, it is not easy to convert this historical system of economy / society into a truly sustainable form. Nonetheless, if human beings are to continue to survive and we wish to leave our environment, which is the basis of our survival, to our descendants, there really is no choice.

"No matter how hard it may be, we must make the necessary efforts to realise a sustainable society. It is necessary to review the concepts that underlie modern civilisation: mass production, mass consumption, mass disposal. We must change our civilisation into a sustainable one which has its economic / social system based on the concept of circulation, and where nature and people live in harmony." ■

NOTES

1. At The Korea Environmental Technology Research Institute, Seoul, 30 Aug -1 Sept 1995.
2. *Our Planet*, the magazine of the United Nations Environment Programme, Vol.7 No.6, 1996.
3. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which resulted from a merger of the Business Council for Sustainable Development and the Industry Council for the Environment, in 1994.
4. A pseudonym.
5. *Victims of Bangkok atmosphere*, *The Nation*, Bangkok, 11 May 1995.
6. During an interview in January 1995.
7. *Commission on Sustainable Development*, fourth session, 18 Apr - 3 May 1996; *Changing consumption and production patterns*, Report of the Secretary-General to the UN Economic and Social Council.
8. *Quality of the environment in Japan*, 1995.

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