

# Improving Media Communication of Sustainability and the Environment: The Need for a Broad Spectrum Approach



While the concept of sustainability has increased in prominence as a global aim in addressing environmental and social inequality problems, public understanding of this aim remains limited. Although the media are a potentially effective domain for public information, previous enquiries have noted many inadequacies in media communication of related issues. This research thus concerns itself with possible approaches to improve media communication of sustainability and the environment. Four distinct studies were conducted.

1

Training in environmental reporting for journalists

Long-term impact assessment (*retrospective pre-test method*)

Positive impacts on:

1. Knowledge
  2. Reporting skills
  3. Information sourcing & evaluation skills
- Unintended impacts:
1. Enhanced job satisfaction
  2. Increased reporting frequency
  3. Motivation to specialise in environmental reporting

2

Sustainability in the journalism curriculum

Immediate effects of an introductory module on sustainability (*one-group pre-experimental evaluation*) & long-term impact assessment on job performances

1. Significant increase in understanding of sustainability
2. Non-significant increase in interest in reporting
3. Awareness of sustainability's multidimensionality
4. Appreciation of the necessity for media coverage to enhance public awareness
5. Application to news reporting in one case

Assessment of integration in the New Zealand journalism curriculum (inspection of curriculum details and questionnaires sent to course co-ordinators)

Majority have not included sustainability as an explicit subject.

3

Mainstream media receptiveness towards a responsible role in covering sustainability issues

In-depth interviews with media decision-makers and questionnaires sent to environmental journalists

1. Tend to be receptive towards an educative role; however, journalistic norms may restrict an educative approach to news reporting
2. Receptive towards corporate social responsibility.
3. Not receptive to editorial policies on the inclusion of sustainability matters in content.

4

Information campaigns in the alternative media

Application of theories and recommendations on effective and persuasive communication to the framing of messages about 'sustainable consumption', advertising and consumerism – implemented through a community newspaper

Controlled *quasi-experimental* method – testing effects on 16 predetermined variables

Significant effects on:

1. Community understanding of 'sustainable consumption'
2. Number of parents expressing concern over advertising effects on children's consumerism.

To ensure environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability of a nation, public understanding of and support towards sustainability initiatives are essential. Considering public dependence on the media for related information and its potential effects on public knowledge, concerns and behaviour, it is imperative that a broad spectrum approach be taken to improve this channel of communication. Based on its findings this research recommends the following steps of action and notes the various factors that would need consideration to achieve the intended improvement:

1. Sponsorship of training for journalists and media managers.
2. A continuous knowledge building process for journalists.
3. Prominent inclusion of sustainability in the journalism curriculum.
4. Development of relevant journalistic guidebooks and resource materials.
5. Skills development for journalism educators and trainers.
6. Enhance the status of environmental reporting – seen as a recognised & viable career choice.
7. Stakeholder understanding of media needs, journalistic norms, and journalists' constraints – facilitate journalists' understanding of intricate issues.
8. Positively act on media's receptiveness towards an educative role.
9. Encourage editorial policies that don't impinge on media independence or a voluntary commitment.
10. Mainstream media reluctance to carry anti-commercialism messages should not be presumed – needs to be brought up as an issue by the public or the scientific community.
11. Government funding – space for environmental media content in a less commercialised atmosphere.
12. Public demonstration of demand and interest (e.g. letters to the editor, feedback log).
13. Actively engage alternative media in effective and persuasive communication.
- Further research into:
  14. the strategic framing of sustainability messages and related news.
  15. journalistic newsworthiness judgement of sustainability.
  16. the implications and practicability of weight-of-evidence reporting.
  17. the implications of crosscutting inclusion of sustainability in the journalism curriculum compared to teaching environmental journalism as a speciality field.
  18. audience reception and educational impacts of sustainability news presented in a designated section as opposed to its incorporation in various news sections.

