

MOVING SUSTAINABILITY ONTO THE MEDIA AGENDA

JoAnn Myer Valenti and Suzanna M. Crage

Brigham Young University, USA

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Summary

An analysis of efforts to move the environmental concept of sustainability onto the public agenda makes clear the importance of understanding journalistic practice and process. A study of media coverage of this environmental and science issue, enhanced by in-depth interviews, reveals obstacles to gaining effective press attention. A case study of efforts by the US President’s Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) demonstrates some of the barriers to the media’s reporting on the science of sustainability. Although the PCSD attempted to engage government, industry, special interest groups, and citizens in a national planning effort for sustainable economic growth, modest media coverage focused on politics rather than environmental issues or sustainability science. Even though media attention to the concept has increased over the past decade, for the media, sustainability continues to lack an acceptable, coherent definition, resulting in skepticism and an emphasis on political conflict rather than information that might result in a full understanding of the substantive issues.

1. Introduction

Effective communication of emerging science issues in the twenty-first century will clearly depend on understanding not only traditional media practice and new media processes, but also adherence to an acceptable ethical protocol. This seems especially true in efforts to inform a multitude of concerned stakeholders about critical, complex environmental issues (see chapters *Communication Strategies for Sustainable Societies; Mass Media in Support of Sustainable Development*). Even in the ever-burgeoning

information age, it remains a truism that journalists write not only the first draft of history, but frequently the second as well. How history will be told depends on how the story is told and, primarily, whether an issue becomes newsworthy and has agenda staying power.

Setting the stage for agenda-worthy information is no small task. Some venture that two major revolutions will mark our recent history: industrialization and sustainability. The spotlight on what is meant by “sustainability” has been flickering at global stage center in what often seems like an endless opening act over much of the end of the twentieth century. There seems to be no limit to the variations on definitions of the term. Some connect the concept with a very specific agenda, such as environmental conservation or regeneration. Some are suspicious the term is being co-opted by environmental adversaries to maintain the status quo. Others have adopted a more holistic meaning, expressed by the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, or the 1987 publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Conflicts over competing objectives, controversy over presumed trade-offs, and general disagreement shroud the term. An agreed upon connotation/denotation appears to remain under construction, and the contractors may be bringing very different blueprints to the task. Probably the simplest definition of the term implies that a “sustainable” activity is one that can be continued indefinitely into the future, with “future” defined as at least seven generations or roughly 200 years.

2. Media Coverage of Sustainability

Journalism’s role as recorder of history and its agenda-setting function have long been recognized if not always embraced (see *History and Development of Mass Communications*). It is understood that the reported news may not tell an audience what to think; however, what is presented in newspapers, television, and other media does tend to establish what people are likely to think about. Successful placement of news and features releases by public relations professionals offers the most basic accountability measure for effective media relations, and, presumably, demonstrates that segments of the public have been reached. Failure to draw media coverage is a frequent concern for NGOs, non-profit organizations, and other small or underfunded public campaign efforts (see chapter *Communication Campaigns Advocating Sustainable Development*).

The principle advanced in agenda-setting theory is that the public responds in accordance to the degree of emphasis placed on issues in the news they receive. In addition, when the media present an issue, they also select which attributes will be emphasized. This second level of attribute salience may have an equally potent impact on how we see, or discuss, prioritized issues. Most communication scholars agree that the media are expert at maintaining the status quo, what people already believe and accept. Changing attitudes or behaviors, especially if new ideas, products, services, or suggested actions appear to conflict with existing attitudes or behaviors, goes beyond the mere delivery of information.

Attitudes toward the environment have ranged over human history from reverence to the belief that exploited resources and destruction are the inevitable price of progress. When the concept of sustainability emerged, both the multitude of stakeholders and journalists struggled to make the complexity and potential biases of the term intelligible. For some, the tendency has been to view sustainability as the retention of what is here now, maintaining existing “traditional” ways of life. Others see change as prerequisite to a new human and natural resource future. Experts added to the uncertainty of the concept by suggesting that the particular resource society attempts to sustain may shift over time, often dramatically. Such shifting alters what sustainability may mean from one period to another. Determining what is to be changed, or maintained, differs depending on the source of the message.

Effectively mediated information presumably aims to reduce uncertainty and confusion. People generally expect the media, with varying levels of credibility, to keep them abreast of what is happening, and to provide useable information as decisions are made about how to get through each day, then onto the next. What is new, where to go, when to go, who is in charge, how is the weather, where is there danger, and why we should pay attention are all facets of media use. The media generally serve as a primary source of information. Media, even in the abundance of the information age, function as “gatekeepers” in the selection of what is newsworthy, although current research calls into question editors’ ability to judge what the public considers important. What this seemingly contradictory situation suggests is that people may be interested in a topic such as sustainability, but the media may not yet reflect that interest on their agenda. Alternatively, media may be covering an issue the public is only beginning to consider.

In addition to media attention to a topic, journalism ethicists look to specific content published or aired for usefulness to the public beyond mere facts. Ethical reporting is believed to empower the media consumer by providing enabling information, such as a phone number or address for further contact, or specific steps one might take toward resolving a presented problem. In the case of sustainability, the first task becomes to define, clearly and fully, what is meant by the term.

In terms of journalism’s who, what, where, when, why, and how, the “what” of the story becomes the dominant obstacle. Without a clear understanding of what is meant by the term, journalists will turn their focus to the source, and the news peg becomes who is delivering the message. How sustainability might be achieved is left behind. The effort by the President’s Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) to introduce sustainability to a national public provides a useful case study for understanding barriers to media coverage of this issue.

3. Case Study: Effect of the President’s Council on Sustainable Development

In the United States, the Clinton/Gore administration embraced the concept of sustainability as consistent with their platform of environmental policies in a unique effort as we entered the last decade of the twentieth century. A rare partnership was formed among leaders from US government, industry, non-governmental organizations, and Native American groups to make recommendations for a national strategy for sustainable development. From the onset, members of the PCSD defined their goal as

one of sustainable *development* (as opposed to sustainable living, sustainable growth, eco-efficiency, or a whole host of alternative qualifiers). Even so, when matters of environmental policy and potential regulation or legislation might be at hand, such a partnering marked a potentially new approach. The PCSD brought an impressive range of leadership to the same table, all with the presumed intent of collaboration to finally define, and potentially implement, sustainability for the national agenda .

Established in June 1993 by Executive Order No. 12852, the PCSD was directed to advise the president and develop an action strategy “to foster economic vitality” that would be sustainable, and that would “benefit present and future generations without detrimentally affecting the resources or biological systems of the planet.” According to an information packet distributed in October 1994, the PCSD adopted the definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland Commission report: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Clinton appointed Jonathan Lash, president of the World Resources Institute, and David Buzzelli, vice president and corporate director of environment, health and safety, and public affairs at The Dow Chemical Company as co-chairs. Meetings were held in Washington, DC during the first year, then again in 1994, with additional meetings in Seattle and Chicago. Meetings during 1995 were held in Chattanooga and San Francisco with a final meeting again in Washington, DC. The usual news releases, media alerts, or briefings preceded each meeting. By the time the anticipated report actually appeared in 1996, Buzzelli had retired from Dow and moved to emeritus PCSD status.

Appointments to the council (along with several named ex-officio and emeritus members) ranged from federal agency administrators (US Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Carol Browner, Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Andrew Cuomo, Interior’s Bruce Babbitt) to heads of some of the nation’s largest and often environmentally controversial industries (BP Oil, General Motors, and, of course, Dow Chemical). Alongside these governmental appointees and industrialists sat top representatives from the Sierra Club, the National Resources Defense Council, and the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission. Others had been named to serve as staff over what became a six-year endeavor, and hundreds eventually participated in a number of task forces. Their goal was broadly defined as “to create a life-sustaining Earth” capable of supporting “a dignified, peaceful, and equitable existence” (See 1996, 1999 PCSD reports available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/PCSD>.)

The National Town Meeting (NTM) held May 2–5, 1999 seemed to be the most heralded activity of the PCSD. Certainly, the town meeting was the strongest effort to involve the public. Originally, the much-awaited final report was to be released at this capstone event, but the publication was delayed in press. That meant rather than being featured prominently in the report, the NTM became only an example of initiatives that might be inspired by the ideas of the PCSD. Vice-President Gore delivered the keynote address in Detroit, making the event a politically partisan news item for journalists, who at that time were more interested in covering the beginnings of the nation’s presidential campaign. President Clinton did not attend. The PCSD and NTM serve as prime examples of what one might expect from media coverage of the issue of sustainability.

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Biographical Sketches

JoAnn Myer Valenti, professor of communications at Brigham Young University, serves on the editorial boards of *Science Communication*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and *SE Journal*, a publication of the Society of Environmental Journalists. She is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and chair of the Science Communication Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Dr. Valenti received a Ph.D. in natural resources from the University of Michigan, and an M.A. in mass communications and B.S. in journalism from the University of Florida.

Suzanna Crage received a BS in microbiology and a BA in psychology from the University of Washington. She completed her M.A. in mass communications at Brigham Young University, and is now a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at Indiana University at Bloomington.

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