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**The Environmental Orientation :
An Alternative Approach In Mass Media Coverage**

By

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL ORIENTATION:
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH IN MASS MEDIA COVERAGE*

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The environment is not a new topic of interest to the mass media of communications. The ^{MAJ} media have been covering environmental information and publish regular reports on such developments as the weather, road conditions, tidal movements, sunsets, or the amount of snow fall in ski resort areas, for as long as anyone here care to remember. One of the important functions of the mass media — ~~identified since the early years of communication study~~ — is, ~~in fact~~, the "surveillance of the environment."

In fact, 40 years ago, in the early years of mass communication as an academic discipline Harold Lowell already identifies that

Clearly, media decisionmakers recognize this function. They are well aware that the audience has as much need to know about the changes in their natural or physical environment, as well as that in their social, economic, and political environments. Such awareness seems to become stronger today than ever before, due to increasing understanding about environmental degradation and its effects on the human welfare in general. As a result, coverage on the environment also appears to be on the increase in the last 4-5 years around the world.

The interest in environment is also shown in Asian mass media. Although it was not as established as it is in the Western media, environmental coverage is on the increase in this region. Just ten years ago, for example, the media in Indonesia have not carried such basic environment rubric such as the weather report (It was then considered unnecessary for a tropical country with year-round warm weather and no seasons.) This has changed today, as people become more aware of the increase in irregular climatic changes or the potential risks which come with rapid industrialization. The Bhopal experience teach the Asian public that environmental problems are no longer the monopoly of Western societies.

Just like in the other parts of the world, news on the environment is becoming a necessity in our countries. ~~When deemed necessary~~ ^{At times,} the environment receives special attention, just like any other topic of interest ^{such as politics} ~~the economy~~. They are played up in headlines more frequently, allocated more prominent spot or larger amount of space, and commented in editorials. Occasion-

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all, the coverage may even be overdone and disproportionate. When weather conditions threaten a city, for example, a full day's television time may be preempted for the environment. Regular radio broadcasts may be interrupted, cover stories may be cancelled or changed, if the conditions rapidly turn to the worse. In short, our media has started to pay environmental coverage the attention it deserves.

The dramatic approach

A closer examination of mass media coverage on the environment, however, ~~may come up with a different conclusion.~~ The media interest in the environment may not be that pure. ~~It turns out, that~~ media efforts are not necessarily motivated by a lofty sense of responsibility to fulfill its function to the society. Instead, the environment is covered increasingly on the basis of commercial considerations.

The media industry has discovered that
Environment stories turn out to be highly marketable. They sell newspapers, particularly when they ^{are concerned with} ~~report on~~ adverse situations, e.g., bad weather conditions, or natural and man-made disasters. When a big flood or a heavy snow storm immobilizes an area, for instance, it touches on the life of every person in that region in its various aspects; thus increasing the value of the event as a subject for news coverage. When an accident in a factory causes the spill of toxic chemicals to a nearby river, it has the potential as a serious threat to everybody who live in the area and along the bank of the river - even if some distance away. This create a big demand for new information of all sorts, to answer the questions and worries of the public. Any news coverage, including human interest feature on how others are coping with the situation (no matter how irrelevant), are sought after and welcomed by the public. *And the mass media meet to fill that demand.*

Many types of environment stories have the potential to become "best sellers". One, is pollution, the more dangerous the better. The second type concerns critical environmental degradation, especially those which cause the sacrifice of human lives. The best illustration of this type is the well-known television coverage on the Sahel dessertification in Ethiopia, which provokes immediate worldwide reaction and sympathy for the victims. Other illustrations are the recent flood in Bangladesh, or the earthquake in the Soviet Union. The third type of highly saleable story concerns daring actions to safeguard the environment by activist groups, as illustrated by the various Greenpeace efforts to stop the transport and dumping of toxic chemicals or the hunting of the whales. Still a somewhat different type of

shows different angle to this trend.

If you take a critical look you will come with the conclusion that

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story pertains to wildlife, e.g. the recent rescue of the whales trapped in the polar ice

To be sure, situations like these do not occur every day. Nevertheless, they may have become standard events, by which mass media evaluate the value of environmental information. This explains why environment stories which get into the newspaper pages or television news are becoming more dramatic. As a consequence, reporters today look for the dramatic aspects in environmental coverage. When no dramatic story is available, reporters may even look for ways to dramatize the facts; this is shown by an analysis of mass media coverage of several environmental cases in Indonesia. The important thing is no longer the implication of the event to the ecosystem, but rather, the action, the conflict, or the drama.

Such approach in mass media coverage is not really very helpful, and perhaps poses a problem in terms of the efforts to enhance the environment. In order to make people understand the real question, the important thing is not the action or the drama, but the facts and knowledge which can raise understanding of the process and stimulate people to participate in environmental actions.

Actually, a dramatic event occurs only after it is too late and the situation becomes critical. When the flood comes or when the water subsides, after many lives and sizable materials have been wasted, information on erosion and other environmental degradation is no longer needed. They would be more useful if they are publicized by the media much earlier, when preventive measures still could be initiated. At that point of time, the situation would still be manageable while the necessary information would already be available.

The process of environmental change is generally gradual. It could be identifiable and, most likely preventable, during the first stages. But of course, there is no drama in the beginning. This is illustrated succinctly by the Sahel crisis; the media did not pay attention a decade earlier when a group of experts try to raise funds to stop desertification while it was still possible. The media become interested only after a heavy toll on human lives, when the process has become irreversible, and fertile soil becomes barren. By that time, the amount of money needed to help the affected population with subsistence food is many times the amount needed earlier to prevent the crisis to happen at all.

There are several problems why information on the earlier stages of

the process are slow to receive proper media attention. First, the criteria ^{being used} to measure environment news is no different than other news categories. This explains the focus on the dramatics. Environment news is not news when nothing, which meet the news criteria, seems to happen. *It becomes news only when*

(i.e. man bites dog)

*the "dogs of the environment"
- the poor population die in the thousands*

Secondly, the environment is abstract and difficult to comprehend. The process of change is slow and complex. There are so many components in the ecosystem, each is interdependent to the other in a complex way. For the most part it is not interesting and exciting for the audience, except when the process reaches a critical and dramatic point. As a result, it is also difficult to cover in a news report, especially when space is limited and the media worker has insufficient knowledge concerning the environment.

In this connection, the cause and effect in environment is generally not clearly perceptible. There is a lag of space and time between action and result. A tree takes tens of years to grow. So is the process of environmental change, whether negative or positive. Furthermore, the results may occur elsewhere. Those who cut the trees in the mountains can not see what damage they bring to the environment. It is the people downstream who will face erosion and floods, and that is many years later.

Environmental orientation *(outline)*

- The media has ^{a big} potentials to help the environmental movement, by making people aware of the problem and encourage public participation. But clearly, the present approach to environmental coverage is not very helpful. *Environment should no longer be judged in terms of the dramatics.*
- In order to have better coverage, media people must be knowledgeable about the environment. But this is difficult to expect. Training can only provide a limited number of environmental reporters. There is also the problem of job rotation, wasting the training effort.
- Furthermore, environment is cross-sectoral, related to all aspects of development. Environmental event could happen everywhere, *not just in one "back" or sector.*
- The solution: environmental orientation or outlook in reporting every sector. Instilling the ability to identify relevant factors in the environment, and find or suggest possible solutions.
- This approach is tried in Indonesia: no matter what a reporter is cover-

ing, he should look at the subject with a critical environmental eye

- This approach is developed in workshops on "coverage with environmental outlook", involving communicators, writers, reporters (print and audiovisual media). Explain the training method: ecosystem, field work, discussions
- Priority is television crew: writers, cameramen, program directors. Afterwards: print media reporters, radio disc jockey, etc. After three years, the approach is effectively applied in television; environment has now become the starting point for various programs
- There are also specialist workshops: e.g. on environmental impact assessment, environmental law etc.
- As environmental changes occur in the regions, workshops are held in the regions, and oriented to local problems, ~~in the regions~~. Localization of the workshop would increase reporter's sensitivity on local issues and problems (Describe AMIC-CDG training workshop)
- In addition to workshops, media people participate in organizing media events. One successful illustration is the Kalpataru award.