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Malaysian Environmental NGOs on the World Wide Web: Communicating Campaigns through the Power of Photographs

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Abstract

Photographs are one of the key aspects available on environmental websites that may transcend environmental stories in ways that words cannot. Lately, photographs are used widely in communicating the environment campaigns online. Three environmental NGOs in Malaysia (ENGOMs) were chosen for this study. A content analysis was conducted on their websites to investigate how they used photographs as powerful tools to communicate environmental campaigns and potentially call people to take action. The result indicates that MNS had well utilised the photographs for its online campaigns, whereas both of WWFM and SAM had moderately utilised the photographs for the same purpose.

Keywords: Environmental NGOs; photographs; environmental campaigns; environmental online communication; World Wide Web

1. Introduction

Environmental communication researchers and advocates have focused on raising public awareness and mobilising support in areas such environmental online campaigns (EOC), website design, website interactivity, website content, etc. Such research is important because EOC is influenced by how communities, stakeholders and policymakers devote greater attention to issues that are salient to the public. Since the Internet has had an impact on

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almost all environmental NGOs (ENGOs) in the west from 1990s, a plethora of online campaigns has emerged since then.

Cottle (2008) argued that mobilisation constitutes the main goal of the ENGOs by motivating people into advocacy campaigns. Further, campaigns via World Wide Web (WWW) enable ENGOs to address the public in a cost efficient way and in return give the government and the public the control to engage only with issue-related concerns. For example, grievances about the idleness of international politics with regard to popular global environmental issues such as pollution, wild life, forestry and climate change unite people locally, regionally, and globally. The special features of the WWW or websites could facilitate the development of advocating and campaigning of environmentalists across the world. Normally expensive campaigns could be done not only faster, but cheaper online.

The most successful e-campaign proves that the innovative use of the websites can drastically empower NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations). The term e-campaigning does not denominate a campaign that is merely run online. Rather the website is the main organising tool which facilitates offline mobilisation and allows to link these two spheres (on- and offline) together (Totz, 2010). Belt (2008) argued that the images (photographs) on websites are effective tool of communication and photographs also can be used to engage activities in environmental campaigns. The campaigns made available related to popular global issues such as wildlife, forest preservation, nature, global warming, and others. He also suggested that websites must represent multicultural traditions to which general public are accustomed such as photographs, identity, logo, colour, and language as these elements affect social and communication practices.

Scholars from environmental communication have also argued that images or photographs are effective tools for communicating about environmental issues and achieving the aforementioned awareness and advocacy goals (Mungai, 2009). However, while research on communicating campaigns on line through photographs about environmental issues is growing, the topic remains underexplored. Even though the resources about communication using photographs provided much information for this study as did resources about environmental online campaign, but very few addressed both subjects as one entity. In order to close this gap, this study investigates how the environmental NGOs in Malaysia (ENGOMs) design their websites by using photographs to communicate environmental campaigns online and potentially call people to take action.

1.1. Environmental websites and online campaigns

Cox (2006) said that advocacy campaigning is a strategic course of action involving communication undertaken for a specific purpose and usually it has its own objectives, purposes, and different target audiences. A campaign has to be planned and designed according to the target audience, for example government and politicians - to influence the regulation of law or legislation; general public or community - to create environmental awareness, influence societal attitudes and behaviour, and also to mobilise citizens to take action; media - to create broad coverage, publicity or campaigns. Typically, environmental advocacy campaigns differ from other types of information campaigns as the campaigns normally seek to change the public attitudes (Cox, 2006).

The dynamic nature on the use of the websites by ENGOs for campaigns clearly illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of both the medium and the ENGOs. They establish websites to campaign and call people to participate and take action, build awareness, facilitate training programmes, reduce costs, raise funds, manage information, disseminate information, communicate with others and avoid travel costs (Özdemir, 2012). Several international campaigns have been advocated successfully online, for examples, Laguna Campaign in 1994 (Scherr, 2002) and the Climate Campaign Berlin in 1995 (Mejin, 2007). These two campaigns were well-designed and exploited creatively, had effectively provided countless highly efficient opportunities to enhance relationships, gain support, and improve donor satisfaction throughout the campaigns which took place simultaneously in different countries. This was the first time campaign information was planned and designed specifically for the WWW. It comprised a central page with links to press releases, reports, photographs and even an interactive quiz. Certainly, this big event proved that the website affords rapid communication between distant people and organisations and allowed people to monitor campaign progress; it could not only inform, educate, manage resources, and fundraise, but could also strongly increase advocacy which potentially mobilise people to take action.

Interestingly, Keck and Sikkink (2004) argued that there was strong evidence on the connection between the use

of websites and online campaigning among ENGOs. They claimed that the Internet technology reflected the diversity of many ENGOs' activities and provided an ideal medium of communication: one-to-one, many-to-many, many-to-few, so was ideally suited to conducting multiple campaigns simultaneously, as they provided mechanisms for targeting different publics. In another study Good (2006) discovered that the ENGOs used the website more strategically for online campaigns around specific goals, whereby well-planned campaigns triggered the desired response.

1.2. The power of photographs in environmental campaigns

Is a picture really worth a thousand words? The popular adage, 'a picture speaks a thousand words' was first used by Confucius back in 500 B.C. The quickly growing popularity of photography since its invention in 1893 helped to support this statement. As we approach the 21st century, Confucius's words ring truer than ever: one photograph can tell the story of an entire event (Ishii, 2007). Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and beyond, photography was used to enhance public awareness of the need for protecting land and recruiting members to environmental organizations. The successful use of photographs online has since become a vital tool in a non-profit's online cultivation, and therefore will help non-profits focus on the relationship they are building, increase awareness among supporters and, over time, lead to fundraising campaign success (Cottle, 2008).

There is a growing interest in the social sciences in the power of visual representation to sway both belief and action (Jasanoff, 2001). According to Lester (2006), photographs that communicate nature can contribute to finding solutions to some of the world's most pressing environmental concerns. Petersson (2010) added that pictures, videos and sound files are presented online to encourage political participation because this can enhance a campaign's credibility and even arouse and amplify a person's outrage and dismay.

Recent research supports the idea that visual communication can be more powerful than verbal communication, suggesting in many instances that people learn and retain information that is presented to them visually much better than that which is only provided verbally (Hewlett Packard, 2004). Photographs are used to bring the world to the people soon after their invention and they can be used to raise awareness about the environment, the problems and the solutions. They can also be used to engage actively with the public through competitions and on online portals. Jasanoff (2001) highlighted that the power of words to compel action has been a subject for philosophical and political analysis from Plato down to modern times. The power of images (photographs) may be no less profound, especially in this era of mass visual communication, but it has yet to receive the same sustained scrutiny from social theorist.

Since the photography field has matured, Mungai (2009) suggested that it is worthwhile to explore its potential as communication tool in terms of how environmental practioners and policy makers can campaign visually using photographs. In another study, Durby (2012) argued that any online campaign requires certain basic elements to succeed. He suggested campaigners to provide photos, videos and make hashtags that thoroughly discuss the subject to keep the target audience interested and always engaged. Even though the message is more likely to be delivered by visuals (photographs) via social media, and the physical presence of the message replaced by the easy, constant barrage of communications, the tactic hasn't changed.

2. Methodology

The website was used by the selected ENGOMs to advocate environmental campaigns in order to potentially mobilise the public to take action. In this study, we look into e-campaigning of the three ENGOMs, focusing on images - in this case, photographs – in communicating their environmental campaigns. The campaigns selected for this study were related to popular global issues such as wildlife, forest preservation, and nature; which have been communicated online by the selected ENGOMs to the public in order to create awareness and understanding on environmental sustainability in Malaysia.

A content analysis of the ENGOMs websites was conducted from 1st to 3rd March 2014 in an attempt to address these issues. We coded one of the important categories of websites that is 'usefulness of information'. This was done based on Bauer & Scharl (2000) and Coupland (2005) who considered that photographs and logos are very useful tools in environmental websites and also very useful information to the media and volunteers, members, and public.

We coded 'photographs that could potentially mobilise people to take action' to answer the research question: How do the selected ENGOMs structure the photographs on their websites to communicate the environmental campaigns online? We then analysed the photographs that could have potentially mobilised people to take action. We also coded photographs that communicated campaigns on wildlife, forests, and nature.

3. Results and discussions

The web content analysis demonstrates that all the three ENGOMs had relatively small websites, providing photographs in communicating environmental campaigns that potentially mobilise support and action. The result in Table 1 below shows that the selected ENGOMs had disseminated the total of embedded was 178 photographs about the environment campaigns.

Table 1. Photographs available in environmental campaigns on ENGOMs websites.

		MNS	WWFM	SAM
Photographs on wildlife		15	24	9
Photographs on forests		18	19	15
Photographs on nature		14	12	13
Total of photographs that potentially mobilise action	(139)	47	55	37
Big total of photographs about environment	(178)	56	73	49
Percentage (%)		84%	75%	76%

Out of that, 139 photographs were disseminated in conducting their environmental campaigns on wildlife, forests, and nature could have potentially mobilised people to take action. MNS provided 47 photographs. For examples in wildlife campaigns, the photographs were embedded to inhabit our consciousness towards the natural habitat and the environment. The photographs had potentially mobilised people to take action about the environment. WWFM provided the biggest number of photographs (55) that could potentially mobilise action in their online campaigns. Photographs embedded in WWFM campaigns include those for "Protect Sea Turtles" and "Save wild lives and wild spaces" documented social ill in order to bring about social change. The purpose of the embedded photographs with the related issues of the campaigns was to bring attention to these problems and hopefully bring about a change to these conditions at the social level. On the other hand, SAM provided 37 photographs that potentially mobilised people to take action. For example, photographs were embedded to tell stories about the Ulu Muda and the Segari Hills, whereby the large areas in both areas in Malaysia were once thickly forested but were destroyed because inhabitants over hasted the trees.

Table 1 above also reflects the percentage of the photographs disseminated on the ENGOMs' sites that could have potentially mobilises action among the people at large. The percentage was calculated as follows; for example: MNS: 47/56 x 100 = 84% (with 56 being the total number of photographs about the environment). MNS provided 47 photographs (84 %) that could potentially mobilise action; whereby 15 were related to wildlife, 18 to forests, and 14 to nature. WWFM provided 73 photographs, 55 (75%) that could potentially mobilise action; whereby 24 were related to wildlife, 19 to forests, and 12 to nature. Finally SAM provided 49 photographs, 37 (76%) that could potentially mobilise action; whereby nine were related to wildlife, 15 to forests, and 13 to nature.

Overall, photographs selected on the three ENGOMs' sites were powerful and had potentially mobilised people to take action; whereby they managed to provoke people to debate, support them to solve the issues, and finally get involved in the campaigns. As suggested by Jasanoff (2001), Belt (2008), Cottle (2008), Mungai (2009), and Durby (2012), the ENGOMs also used the power of photographs in their online campaigns for communication and information collation on the activities that they carried out. The photographs embedded in the three ENGOM's online campaigns had constructed identities and invested them with "believability" about the environment issues. By communicating the photographs in such a way, to some extent, the three ENGOMs had potentially mobilised individuals and organisations into a strong alliance to assure the preservation of Malaysian resources.

4. Conclusion

"Seeing is believing." It has been that way from the beginning, long before Messrs (Mungai, 2009). An innovative photography has a great environmental story to tell. It is an informative and engaging visual

communication product telling stories about nature and the environment. As argued by Lester (2006), Belt (2008), photographs that communicate nature can contribute to finding solutions to some of the world's most pressing environmental concerns. The results of the websites content analysis reflected that the selected ENGOMs had used photographs on their websites to communicate environmental campaigns. This is in agreement with Keck and Sikkink (2004) argued who argued that there was strong evidence on the connection between the use of websites and online campaigning among ENGOs. The findings also support Cox (2006) and Good (2006) who argued that online advocacy campaigning is a strategic course of action involving communication that triggered the desired response whereby the ENGOs often mobilised people to take action.

It can be concluded that the ENGOMs had promoted wide public awareness of the values of Malaysian resources and issues involved through the photographs in their online campaigns. However, this research opens up new fields of research to fill the gap in literature on the rhetoric elements of photographs and the effectiveness of the photographs for online campaigns. Therefore, it is suggested that research be conducted to investigate how photographs can rhetorically communicate environmental messages, raise environmental awareness and influence human behaviour; and how effective photographs can play the role in environmental online campaigns.

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