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A Study on Sustainable Journalism Practice for Sustainable Development in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable journalism is the brand of journalism that does not only think about improving quality of media contents today, but also seeks to sustain this to the benefits of generations to come. The study of sustainable journalism becomes important because the need for quality journalism is on the rise as societies become more complex and citizens become more empowered by the social media tools. On the other hand, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The United Nations has observed that in correcting ecological imbalances and responding appropriately to climate change crises, larger attitudinal changes are required to ensure access to food, water, energy, education, health, and other areas where mal-adaptations exist. The world body also noted that more often, the environmental angle is lost while reporting domestic developmental concerns, resulting in misdirected public perception. Therefore this research aims to fill the knowledge gap, expose Malaysian journalists to the body of socio-scientific research they can use as foundational tools and support them in creating more enduring, wholesome narratives, while tackling interdisciplinary threads of public discourse involving sustainability, governance and economic development. This study utilizes a general definition of journalism, which addresses both traditional and new forms of journalism, and through qualitative research approach, aims at identifying opportunities that sustainable journalism presents to Malaysia's sustainable development and also the ...

Keywords: Sustainable Development; Sustainable Journalism; Millennium Development Goals; Sustainable Development Goals

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A STUDY ON SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Sustainable journalism is the brand of journalism that does not only think about improving quality of media contents today, but also seeks to sustain this to the benefits of generations to come. The study of sustainable journalism becomes important because the need for quality journalism is on the rise as societies become more complex and citizens become more empowered by the social media tools. On the other hand, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The United Nations has observed that in correcting ecological imbalances and responding appropriately to climate change crises, larger attitudinal changes are required to ensure access to food, water, energy, education, health, and other areas where mal-adaptations exist. The world body also noted that more often, the environmental angle is lost while reporting domestic developmental concerns, resulting in misdirected public perception. Therefore this research aims to fill the knowledge gap, expose Malaysian journalists to the body of socio-scientific research they can use as foundational tools and support them in creating more enduring, wholesome narratives, while tackling interdisciplinary threads of public discourse involving sustainability, governance and economic development. This study utilizes a general definition of journalism, which addresses both traditional and new forms of journalism, and through qualitative research approach, aims at identifying opportunities that sustainable journalism presents to Malaysia's sustainable development and also the obstacles in achieving it. It builds on the agenda setting theory of the press, especially on the assumption that sustainability can only be investigated through such integrated research approaches and in close contact with the journalistic practice in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development, Sustainable Journalism, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals*

1. Introduction

This is a work in progress and is hinged on the United Nations post 2015 sustainable development agenda. The term sustainable development was first used in 1987 in the *Brundtland Commission Report on Our Common Future*. The commission (1987) defined sustainable development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” and the term has been used in international summits covering environmental and development issues. In Rio de Janeiro Brazil summit in 2012, the participating countries agreed to develop a set of sustainable development Goals (SDGs) to build upon to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015. Although sustainability has

become something of a buzz word, but in its original and broader contexts it means that journalism should be able to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Every society requires a journalism that seriously addresses the sustainability challenges facing it, and this means that journalism as a practice as well as a business can only survive in this technology age on its capacity to ensure sustainability in teaching and in practice. Kovack and Rosentiel (2007) stated that journalism is not defined by technology, nor by journalists or the techniques they employ. Rather the principles and purpose of journalism are defined by something more basic – the function news plays in the lives of people. They added that news is that part of communication that keeps us

informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in the world outside. Though it may be interesting or even entertaining, the foremost value of news is as a utility to empower the informed. In furtherance, they opined that the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their government. In Malaysia, the government emphasizes much on sustainable development, and sees the media as partners in its various development efforts. In this wise, men and women who report news are called on to be responsible in the manner in which they gather and disseminate information, with a view to ensuring sustainable reporting that must be ethical, truthful, responsible, balanced and fair. On the other hand, the expectations of members of Malaysian public is that sustainable journalism in the country will move beyond reporting breaking news on what the government said, to a more prolonged civic engagement that encompasses investigation of public office holders whenever the need arises. Again, they expect to see that media coverage of issues impacting Malaysian communities must be conducted in such a manner as to foster collective action and public engagement. However, the questions that need to be asked are; how is journalism engaging Malaysian youths today? What kind of message do journalists in the country send to the youths? Besides, how will journalism practice in Malaysia today sustain the future?

2. Literature Review

The United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) framework expired in 2015, and before the expiration, governments of different countries, development agencies and other organizations had already started to discuss what would happen in the years after 2015. In view of this, the United Nations (2015) developed journalists' toolkit on reporting

the post-2015 development agenda. In the toolkit, the world body detailed different aspects of media coverage on global issues. They include poverty eradication, food security and sustainable agriculture, healthy lives and sustainable living environments for all, education and lifelong learning, water and sanitation for a sustainable world. Others are sustainable economic growth, energy and industrialization, sustainable consumption and production (SCP), climate change, marine resources ecosystems and biodiversity, and peaceful and inclusive societies, means of implementation and global partnership.

Agenda setting describes a powerful influence of the media in its ability to tell members of the public what issues are important. The core assumption of the theory is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. To demonstrate the power of the media in setting agenda, McCombs and Shaw investigated the US presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976, with the 1968 focusing on awareness and information. They attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign. They concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign

Sustainable development means different things to different people. To some, sustainable development is a serious issue that must be tackled, but to others, it cannot be achieved. This is where the role of the media becomes very important. Journalists are expected to set the sustainable development agenda by focusing on those issues that will help the government to achieve development targets for the country. However, it is interesting to note that most of the governments of countries of the world see

sustainable development as important task that must be accomplished in order for younger generation to have surest foundation of their future.

In Malaysia, several studies have been done on sustainable development. For example, in their exploratory study on preliminary insight on sustainability reporting and assurance practices in Malaysia, Sawani, Zain and Darus (2010), found that sustainability reporting and assurance practices are observed as in an-up-coming stage in the country, noting that most respondents disclosed conducting various environmental and social activities but failed to report them.

Lee and Chuan (2012) in their study on communicating environmental sustainability in Malaysia, found that even though there is high level of awareness on environmental sustainability, yet many staff of the company under study do not often participate in the company's sustainability initiatives. These go a long way to show peoples' attitude towards sustainable development in general, and sustainable environment in particular.

3. Research Methods

This study uses qualitative research approach, with respondents drawn from the newspapers with highest circulation in Malaysia. This includes both the English and local language newspapers. It makes use of in-depth interview to get information from Editors of the newspapers. The choice of editors is informed by the fact that they are the ones that make editorial decision on what kind of stories to cover. Also, editors are the last gatekeepers in the news editing process, and have the right to reject, amend or approve particular new stories.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In the UNESCO series on Journalism Education entitled *Media as partners in*

education for sustainable development: a training and resource kit, Bird, Lutz and Warwick (2008) stated that it is not essential to have a science degree in order to report accurately what scientists are saying and doing. They noted that a good journalist should however learn something about the subject on which they are reporting, adding that a journalist reporting climate change for example need to gain rough knowledge of the science involved. Their position is that a journalist needs to know just enough to make sense of what the experts are saying, but not so much as to confuse members of the public with excess details. Bringing the agenda setting function of the media into play here, it is pertinent to note that the media may not be very effective in swaying public support for or against sustainable development. However, by consistently raising particular questions and issues and by showing interest in one of the many aspects of sustainable development, the media can lead discussion that will elicit public engagement.

In this technological era, where the mainstream media are in stiff competition with the social media and other alternative media, the role of the journalists in reporting sustainable development has been challenged the more. This is in view of the fact that ordinary citizens with smart phones now participate in news production. The social media tools such as Facebook, twitter, and Whataspp among others have armed the public with the platform to disseminate information. This means that it is no longer a matter of choice for Malaysian journalists to report sustainability, rather it is now a matter of necessity and urgency. Notwithstanding, from the data generated so far for this study, Malaysian journalists do report sustainable development, even though there is not much of advocacy reporting on the issue.

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