

Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Brandenburg
Workshop: Strategies of successful communication of sustainability
3. The role of media in successful communication of sustainability
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The economic dimension of sustainability in German daily press

I would like to talk to you about the subject “sustainability” from the point of view of a regional daily newspaper. In opposite to national papers in Germany the regional papers traditionally are more close to their readers. This has big advantages, because we normally get immediately the reactions of our readers, so that usually we know very well in which subjects they are interested. But, this has also sometimes big disadvantages, because many of their statements are telling us, that the readers in general prefer regional stories. And this means, that it is sometimes not easy to present in the newspaper stories about for example “global warming”, “justice between generations” or more difficult the imbalance on the global market between north and south. So the art of good journalism in my opinion is, to transform these subjects on a regional level, which means to show the relations between local and global.

In my paper I would like to point out five aspects:

1. I will try to explain you the role which the newspaper is playing in general, as I see it, between politics and reader respectively civil society.
2. I would like to make some remarks about the use and misuse of the terms “sustainability”/“sustainable” in politics, economics – and also in the media.
3. I will talk about an example of a very dangerous misuse of the term “sustainability”: The way it is sometimes discussed about bio-fuel in many ecologically engaged groups of the civil society but also in the green parties.
4. I will try to draw out very shortly the fundamental relations between environment, economy and the social dimension when we are talking about sustainability.
5. and finally I want to tell you my opinion about the task of journalists and their responsibility in a daily newspaper.

1. The role of the newspaper

The role of a regional daily, but also of course in general a national daily is first of all, I would say, the critical exchange of information between politics and readers in the public space. So simplifying a lot we could say: We have on the one hand the input of information (if there are any?) given by politics, business and pressure groups. They have in general only one interest: They want, that the things, they do or want are represented in the public space as positive as possible. (Of course it is absolutely the opposite way, if the things they do are not possible to be represented in a positive way. Then their interest is naturally that we don't write and they try to neglect the facts.) So actually our job is, to report from a point of view as objective as possible and that means clear, understandable and on the first place with critical distance. This is important because this is the only way that the readers are able to judge the facts in their way. On the other hand we have the readers, who have the right that we present them only these facts in which they are very interested and this in a way that they like to read them. But, these readers are at the same time members of the civil society and as they are more or less engaged in it, they are also following their special interests. This is a second input and we have to deal with their positions and demands in the same way: from a critical distance and as objective as possible.

I am insisting on this, because I think it is important when we are talking about "sustainability". The position of a regional daily is on the point of intersection between interests of politics, economy and society. It can never ever be an arbitrator. And it will never be able to be absolutely neutral, but it is the job of journalists to be fair to all positions. The job is, to give room to all the different and often contradictory opinions and arguments, which exist in the public space. And we have to proof them. For the only and simple reason that then the reader, maybe in his specific function as politician, businessman or –woman, trade unionist, member of a NGO or just only as a citizen, is able to form his opinion.

2. The use and misuse of the terms "sustainability"/"sustainable" in politics, economics and media

It is not at least the media to be accountable, when trendy words or slogans are circulating, words which give no clear evidence about their material content. Often it is the target of special pressure groups to let them circulate. And it is the mistake of the newspapers and it is the lack of critical distance of journalists, when they accept these kinds of slogans, proposed by politics, business an others, and when they are then used by nearly everybody in every wrong or right context. A very good example for that what I mean is the word "innovation", a word which in Germany has become an absolute empty word in the nineties, which means at least nearly all which is new, unimportant if it is silly or just absurd. "Innovation" sounds positive when you try to sell something to clients or citizens. And unfortunately the terms "sustainable" and "sustainability" have also become words without content and sense in our daily life.

Everybody is talking about „sustainability“, which on the first place must not be bad. But today in German public the term is a hollow word, which means all and nothing. I think the task of the newspapers and the media in general is to confront such a phenomenon with serious critic. We don't have to print such nonsense without critical comments. It is our job and the duty we have to our readers, to point them, that in many cases this word is not used in the sense of serious politics, it is used as ideological appearance.

3. Why using bio-fuel is not at all a sustainable strategy

But, and this is also a dangerous phenomenon, also on the green, alternative side of politics we have a certain form of naive use of the term „sustainability“. A good example is the proposition of using bio-fuel on the place of normal, chemical fuel. Of course bio-fuel is an opportunity, but it is not the solution of the problem. If there is something, that is not suitable to organize a sustainable society, it is the idea, that people will drive their cars with bio-fuel, which is produced by the farmers of their country. I give you some reasons:

1. because we do not have enough fields to produce so much raw material for bio-fuel and to produce at the same time as much food as we need.

2. so, producing bio-fuel would probably mean a still more intensive farming, more consumption of water, chemical fertilizer, more monocultures (especially maize and rape) and at worst the cultivation of genetic modified organisms (GMO).

3. this means on the other hand we would have to buy the raw material on the global market, in concurrence with other strong economies, which means growing prices, also for food, and probably deeply hard consequences for the people in the poor countries: the shortage of food will grow in this countries because they won't feed with their soy only the cows for our stakes as they do today, in addition they would produce food for our cars.

4. one of the best raw material for bio-fuel is palm-oil. But how will we control, that the poor countries will not begin to stub their palm-oil-plantations with all the consequences in addition for global warming?

In short: If we discuss bio-fuel as substitute for chemical fuel it can not be a sustainable strategy if we look to the ecological, economic and social consequences. Because basically it is careless to believe that we must only substitute chemical fuel and that it is possible to do this. Talking about sustainability must mean to think about other cars, which need less fuel or better other technical and infrastructural solutions of transport and mobility. And it is also the task of journalists to discuss these critical questions in our daily newspapers.

4. Sustainability: Environment, business, society

Sustainability is not only an ecological term. It has an economic and a social dimension, which is often forgotten in the public space – also by the media. When

we talk about sustainability, we can't think only about nature, about biodiversity and how it is possible to save them as much as possible. We have to talk about more and other things. The questions are: How do we live? How do we want to live? And how can we live? And the way we actually live has not only consequences to nature, it has immediate consequences to the manner of living together in our societies. To say it a little bit brutal: If the survival of the citizens is becoming more expensive and more expensive, we will have conflicts inside of our societies, which will let us soon forget the environmental problems.

So sustainability is not only a question of environmental policy. It is a question for businessmen and –women, enterprises, consumer, for social policy, financial policy, for pension funds, schools and other educational institutions and at least for the citizens in general.

5. The task and the responsibility of a daily newspaper

All these subjects have to be reported, discussed, criticized in a serious and critical daily newspaper – and for that it is not necessary that the titles and subtitles use therefore always the term “sustainability”. But: Newspapers are made in a certain context and this means under certain restraints of production. This means for example the capacity of the staff, the limited number of pages you have and on the first place: topicality. So, what you are reading in the newspaper is in regular not what a well-meaning critical editor thinks that he/she could write today. And this is no handicap. What you find in the newspaper is or should be in general, and that's why it is called a daily, what was happening of interest and importance yesterday. The consequence is: Not every subject can be in the newspaper at anytime. It depends heavily on the topicality of the day, on what the editor has to react to. This is the reason why you find a certain kind of journalistic mainstream in the newspapers.

The creativity of the editor-staff of a newspaper you find on the first place in the manner they present the subjects. The everyday question is: Which subject do we present on the first page? Which do we make big, which small, which do we forget today? And this demonstrates the excellence of a newspaper. The quality of the reporting and this means first of all the big stories with much background-information, because this is the point where we are in general better than radio or TV.

When you understand this logic of topicality and how a newspaper like all media is working I think you see the opportunities you have as engaged readers, citizens and members of organizations of the civil society in connection with the media. It is important for you to realize the right moment, the moment when you are interesting for the journalist and when you should contact him, because it is you with your expertise and your special knowledge, who are able not only to tell him something important and interesting, but something which is connected to the topicality of the day.