

BEHIND THE SCENES: MEDIA INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS COLLABORATING TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to discover ways that multi-stakeholder platforms for collaboration can be instrumental in the efforts of the media industry to achieve compliance with strategic sustainability and enhance its practices of Corporate Social Responsibility. Industries have gained awareness of their responsibilities towards environmental, social and economic welfare, and the media has a powerful role within society. The media industry's behavior is reflected both through its impacts of business operations as well as media products. The premise of this research suggests that an effective platform model fosters interpersonal, stimulating and energizing conversations amongst stakeholders in a neutral and friendly environment. In collaboration with various media stakeholders and showcasing an existing UK-based platform, the Media CSR Forum, and in investigating its structure and membership dynamics, it was possible to gain insight of common challenges for media companies. There is opportunity for commitment to developing solutions as an industry, and we identify the potential for platform models to help media companies plan strategically with the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development. Strategic planning for sustainable development can help the media industry to face the challenge that their current contribution to un-sustainability represents and become a key player for sustainable societies.

Keywords

Media Industry, Sustainable Development, Sustainability/CSR/CR, Multi-Stakeholder Platform for Collaboration (MSPC), Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD), Forum.

1. Introduction

Conrad Brean of “Wag the Dog” said: “What difference does it make if it’s true? If it’s a story and it breaks, they’re gonna run with it.” Brean’s cynicism depicts the Media Industry (MI) as a reckless, news-thirsty envoy without concern for the society it services. Over the last few decades, self-awareness of our impacts on society and nature has meant more and more skepticism from citizens about the source and veracity of the information they consume. Questioning everything we hear is a common Western reality, as social trust decreases and global issues rise to an overwhelming level of complexity.

As students of the Masters on Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability, an outstanding lesson we learned is that the only way to see genuine improvement in dealing with sustainability issues across businesses is that there must be a collaborative, strategic effort.

This paper is divided in three sections: the first provides an overview of the sustainability challenge and the role media companies play as corporate citizens within the demands of this challenge. We will also outline our case study in section one. The second part of the paper provides the key results of this research, which will then be discussed in the third section.

1.1 The Media Industry’s Responsibility within the Global Sustainability Challenge

Due to its remarkable role in mass communications, we believe the media has great responsibility to provide services not only in order to self-sustain as a series of popular businesses, but to employ its services towards a unique contribution to more conscientious future societies. We have found that the matter of deciphering the approach to sustainable development across the media industry, is a novel realm of research.

The Media sector – broadly defined – could become the dominant industry of the 21st century. No other industry will so powerfully influence how people and politicians think about corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development (SD) priorities (Good news & Bad 2002, 1). How can the media industry help accelerate society towards sustainability?

1.2 The research

The concept “Mass Media” normally evokes images of television and radio shows, newspapers, magazines, social media, YouTube, and so on. Audiences consume these services to be informed, entertained, and to some extent, to be educated. Media products are the offspring of a myriad of businesses, journalists, artists, writers, producers, and even you, all clustered under the label “Media Industry” (MI). Modern media companies, though officially autonomous, partake in a vast web of interconnected information through time and space. Seeking a joint sustainability effort somewhere within this web, we discovered and investigated concrete platforms that host meetings with media company representatives and stakeholders to discuss practices towards sustainable consumption and production as means of Corporate Social Responsibility. We sought ways that these forums’ impact cascaded from behind the scenes of the media industry, to individual media companies’ sustainable business operations working within society within the biosphere.

Taking a systems approach to the media industry offered us the opportunity to identify some media-specific sustainability challenges, such as: freedom of expression, transparency of process, impartiality and balance, accessibility and media literacy, among others. The reality of a diverse range of media companies dealing with multifaceted issues makes collaboration within the sector a requisite for addressing issues and developing successfully as an industry. In leaving aside their differences as competing companies, stakeholders that gather in media forums for collaboration are committed to sharing innovative sustainability practices, knowledge, stories of success, and concerns, as a way of addressing the sustainability challenges they face as a sector.

Therefore, scoping the study around these platforms for collaboration elicited the research query: *In what ways can Multi-Stakeholder Platforms for Collaboration (MSPCs) be instrumental for the Media Industry to move strategically towards sustainability?*

The purpose of the research is to explore ways that MSPCs can be instrumental as tools for collaboration for the media industry to advance towards sustainability. Outlining the strengths and obstacles of MSPC developments in the media industry (i.e. how are they currently helping and hindering the media industry in moving towards sustainability?), researching ideal traits of what makes an effective forum, and developing recommendations to current and expected forums will help direct and substantiate the purpose of this research.

To this end, the research was designed to:

- analyze MSPCs as tools for the strategic sustainable development of the MI within the wider society within the biosphere,
- explore current effective initiatives,
- outline progressive measures,
- brainstorm ideas for successful MSPCs,
- shed light on current obstacles MSPCs face and
- outline opportunities for media companies using MSPC models for strategic planning towards sustainability.

With this initiative in mind, along with similar ones that are occurring now in the media industry, we look at potential ways the media can take an effective collaborative approach to strategic sustainability planning, through joining together in settings where open and dynamic conversation is possible.

Amidst a thorough literature review, our research approach focused on the development of a case study, presented in section 1.6, and entailed interviewing or surveying 21 media stakeholders unrelated to the case study, drafting and distributing a report of preliminary results and holding feedback sessions with our collaborators and CSR experts for validating the results. Having a good case study was one of the research strengths, however, time and few literature reports for the CSR practices of the media industry as such were the main limitations.

1.3 The Sustainability Challenge and Strategic Sustainable Development

Across the world, citizens have become an integral part of technological change, social media, and exposed to enormous amounts of information. Meanwhile, in the pursuit of meeting our needs, new paradigms and conflicts keep emerging, presenting different barriers for humans to thrive harmoniously and indefinitely on earth. Some of these complex global challenges include rundown ecosystems, overpopulation, peak oil and shrinking forests. These issues are “putting the well-being and development of all nations at increasing risk (WWF 2008, 2). Why then does humanity struggle to rise together and alleviate these circumstances? The problem is not a lack of courage, but rather a misperception of reality (Broman, Holmberg and Robèrt 2000). Ideally, the intimate exposure of current issues to individuals via a myriad of media channels should certainly inspire positive societal shifts. If

many citizens are now aware and conscious of global problems, the logical action is to generate solutions for the well-being of society. Yet, response from ever-connected global citizens seems to be lagging. Perhaps an overall sense of the larger picture is the missing link between awareness and action. Access to countless sources of information tends to maintain the illusion that today's complex problems are separate from each other and from individuals. On the contrary, all activities are tightly interrelated and systemic (Robèrt 2000). Then, how can society see this interconnected reality and work to eliminate the above mentioned systemic errors of design? Indeed, an active, whole-systems approach to sustainable development could help mark the trail for industries and businesses within society towards a more sustainable way of existence. This is why this thesis explores both the concept of "sustainable development" within society and furthermore, deciphers ways of *strategic planning* towards sustainability, to help us plan together to arrive collectively at a world that is more sustainable.

To simplify the shared sustainability challenge without reducing its importance, a group of scientists and academic collaborators agreed in the 1980s on the very minimum conditions needed for earth to support current human and animal species sustainably. The four scientific sustainability principles, outlined below, were developed initially by Karl-Henrik Robèrt and John Holmberg along with academic peers. They are based on a scientifically agreed upon worldview and were developed collaboratively (Ny et al. 2006).

Our research assumed the following basic principles for sustainability:

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing

1. concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth's crust
2. concentrations of substances produced by society
3. degradation by physical means
and in that society...
4. people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs

Everything we do that has an environmental impact falls under principles one through three. One may congratulate themselves for being environmentally sustainable if they do not in any way contribute to systematic increases of substances from the earth's crust into the biosphere (ex. fossil fuels), or manmade substances such as pesticides and plastics, or physically degrade nature in any way (ex. overharvesting, drought, etc).

Sustainability principle four, social sustainability, is concerned with social systems and is equally as significant as the first three principles. Sustainability principle four reminds us that though an inhabitable planet is certainly based on scientific conditions, human inhabitants must be able to meet their needs in order to thrive perpetually. Should we manage to comply with principles 1-3, humans still depend on a minimum amount of social trust and cohesion to flourish for generations to come. When it comes to human needs, we regard Max Neef's definition of nine fundamental needs to be suitable: participation, subsistence, freedom, leisure, affection, understanding, identity, creativity, and protection (Max-Neef 1991). If we allow conditions of nature to worsen, then degrading social conditions will follow. Maintaining a strong, diverse and vibrant social fabric is essential for overall sustainability.

Through a scientifically rigorous, peer reviewed definition of sustainability as part of planning for any complex system, it was possible to determine generic guidelines for sustainability planning and apply them worldwide through the activities of the international organization "The Natural Step".

When planning for Strategic Sustainable Development, individuals and organizations can easily lose sight of the higher purpose of strategy and drown in details. Since its development in the early 1990's, many companies, organizations and individuals have adopted the use of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) as a guiding compass for developing their sustainability strategies from a more informed perception of society within the biosphere, and using strategic guidelines to lead them towards success.

The framework offers a shared language through the scientific sustainability principles, uses a "systems perspective" (appreciating intricate links and causal relationships amongst units in a system), and practically applies across cultures, organizations, learning forums, and individuals (Nattrass and Altomare 2002, 67). Its structure is as follows:

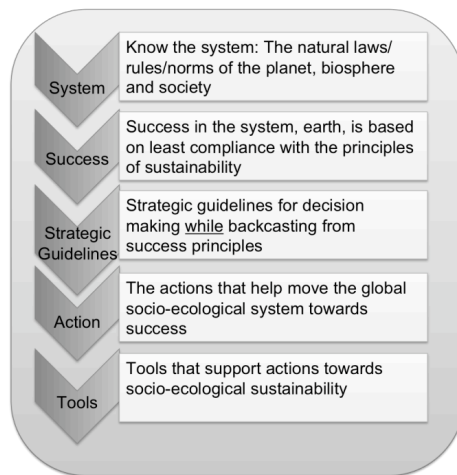


Figure 1.1 Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

The FSSD consists of 5 levels that are intended for planning within the complex system of the biosphere. The first level is concerned solely with perceiving and understanding the system in question. All systems have complex mechanisms that must be appreciated and understood first and foremost before planning and decision-making occurs within them.

The *systems level* of the FSSD contains the reality of an entity's place within society, within the biosphere. The systems level is valuable in its ability to unify practitioners' understanding of the overall system, as it highlights the dynamic relationships between ecological and societal systems, and can moreover help to easily identify one's place within this complex system.

Within the *success level* of the FSSD then, are the conditions for living sustainably on the planet. The four principles for sustainability are dictated by the planet's natural laws and were formulated to help contextualize overall basic needs of compliance for Earth's capacity to sustain life over time (Robèrt 2000).

Accordingly then, a *successful* state or reality within the *system* should be sought in order to optimize its functioning. For global sustainability then, *success* depends on minimum compliance with the sustainability principles by society.

The *strategic guidelines* level of the FSSD is built on backcasting ((Robinson 1990 (cited in Ny et al. 2006) and Dreborg 1996 (cited in Holmberg and Robèrt 2000)) from the vision of success in the biosphere. In this way, the strategy will be logical, guiding principles used for defining success during the planning process to ensure that planners will arrive, step-by-step, to sustainability. Naturally, every level of society must begin to strategize towards a

sustainable world, from individuals to organizations, to governmental policy (Robèrt et al 2007, xxvii). Steps in the right direction must be flexible and able to adjust to the changing conditions of society. Measures must hence be systemic changes that apply on a fundamental level, or a different way of thinking. Rather than acting as soon as a conflict arises, backcasting from principles means *planning for the future*, so that negative societal impacts and pollution are avoided *before* they become harmful to nature and people (Broman et al 2000).

When working within the context of the FSSD, the *action* level represents the carrying-out of strategic steps towards success within the system, and finally, the *tools* level is for determining techniques, instruments, management methods, etc, to implement these actions. Actions and tools are what ultimately help an organization, individual, and society move towards compliance with success/global sustainability. Taking a whole-systems perspective to every planning process can be daunting because it is easy to become confused about the intricacies of relationships and interplays in society, an organization, or even amongst individuals. Given the wide and complex scope of the global sustainability challenge, the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development is a useful structure to apply to any system. It helps provide perspective about an entity's unique role within society, within the biosphere, and can help to spark imaginative action towards a vision of success.

Having just explored a comprehensive definition of 'sustainability', it is important to consider the subject of language for the sake of clarity. Our research found that different media companies entitle their sustainability reports inclusively, CSR reports, CR reports and Sustainability reports, denoting that the terms are synonymous when it comes to reporting business' progress. CSR and CR have distinct origins as concepts, however. Willard explores the importance of terminology for a company or an organization when it comes to complex issues such as social and environmental impacts (Willard 2005, 14). Albeit the labels "Sustainable Development", "CSR" and "CR" have embedded ideas and developed from distinct origins, outlined below, this report will use the term 'sustainability' as an all-encompassing umbrella concept.

Traditionally, *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a *voluntary* basis. It is about enterprises deciding to go

beyond minimum legal requirements and obligations stemming from collective agreements in order to address societal needs (European Commission for Enterprise and Industry, 2001).

Similarly, *Corporate Responsibility (CR)* encompasses the mix of responsibilities that every company faces, namely economic, legal, ethical and discretionary, which categorize the ways businesses manage their relationship with wider society. Companies have CR obligations, not just options, even when legal compulsion is minimal (Blowfield and Murray, 2008)

Whether an organization addresses their socio-ecological concerns under the umbrella terms CSR, CR, SD or Sustainability, each term denotes the ubiquitous three legged stool of sustainability: economic, environmental and social responsibility for societal well-being (Willard 2005). It is important to mention that organizations use these terms even without demonstrating their understanding of what they imply. For clarity purposes, this paper will use 'sustainability' when referring to the necessary global compliance with the sustainability principles to perpetually sustain society.

1.4 ON THE AIR: Sustainability Opportunities for the Media Industry

Media companies, as businesses themselves, should behave responsibly. Like any other business in any other sector, they need to understand their most significant material, environmental, social and governance impacts and issues; and seek to minimize negative environmental and social impacts, and maximize positive impacts (Grayson 2008, 2). Media itself is certainly impactful, as the lives of global citizens have been radically different since the bombardment of assorted channels of media content.

Various media outlets expose largely disjointed reporting about global sustainable development in their content, partly due to its complexities and illusion of remoteness. Headlines will vary from one hot story to another, barely skimming the weight of importance of issues such as 'climate change', 'biodiversity' or 'the food crisis.' A coherent underlying message is often nowhere to be found. On the other side of exposed content lies the heart of the Media Industry (MI). The MI is vast, layered, and powerful. There are a multitude of responsible individuals that are only loosely related to content creation, if at all. As such, the MI is comprised of many working businesses', each occupying a place within society, each having a desire to sustain. In the late 1990's, the media industry faced a shocking reality when it found itself ranked as one of the highest polluters, equally as harmful to society and

the environmental as some companies in the oil and mining industries (Toennesen, in Guillen, Katan and Xu 2010). This wake-up call generated a response of self-awareness and shame across the industry. Next came the reaction to demands from the public for a more responsible and trustworthy media industry as reported by our collaborators.

Interestingly, there is a discrepancy between words and actions with the media industry having serious socio-environmental impacts. The information that media develops and puts out is frequently critical of every industry except itself. Grayson remarks that there is “very often a conspiracy of silence within the media on their own ethics” (Grayson, 2008). We know that the media is anything but silent in most situations, but when it comes to reporting on its own challenges and impacts on society and nature, there exist some barriers to coherence.

These barriers run deeper than the final media product, and, like every industry, media companies are meeting sustainability challenges from their internal business operations through the content they expose. But with a powerful voice and sway on public opinion, many would argue that the media industry has a larger sustainability mission than other businesses, and that lasting public trust in the industry is the golden ingredient for its prosperity. Webb reasons that “it is how much trust we have in the media that will determine which firms survive and prosper, and which fail, in the current business turmoil media businesses find themselves floundering in” (Grayson, 2008).

As mentioned in the “Mapping the Landscape” Survey (Mapping the Landscape, 2008) “media has a responsibility to foster a more ecologically and socially sustainable society”. Like all industries though, too many disparities amongst media companies and stakeholders on the subject of CSR can prevent tangible change.

1.5 Multi-Stakeholder Platforms for Collaboration (MSPC) in the Media Industry

Planning Together for SSD in Complex Systems

Collaboration is a key ingredient for the levels of society that need to implement significant changes in complex systems. At the organizational, economic and governmental levels, where multifaceted societal events play unique and separate roles in human activities, straightforward planning for everyone is extremely difficult and almost impossible (Robèrt, 2000). Maintaining coherence of actions from large groups of people is tricky because of

diverse opinions and life experiences. On the other hand, there is enormous opportunity that a group of people can realize on a much more effective scale than individually, should they share the same aspirations and vision. There is significantly more intellectual power in a team, than in an individual. Diversity in this case offers more capacity and strength from the combined skills of many individuals. Collaboration amongst peers and groups of people is then surely needed in order to plan strategically for wide-scale sustainable development. Contrary to historical overcoming of extreme hardships over short periods though, sustainability needs to be a long-term, informed investment with shared dedication. Social media is making parallel collaboration easier and more efficient across the globe, and is, according to some communications/media specialists, the future style of human enterprise (Steffan, 2009). Human consciousness is becoming ever more connected by virtue of media and technology and a growing self-awareness (Rifkin, 2009).

In order to enable a strategic approach towards sustainability within the MI, coalesced engagement around the issues is essential. Because of its almost omniscient reach, the MI has an exciting opportunity to engage both enterprises and the public in action for a common purpose. Innovating towards a more sustainable future needs to be a collaborative effort across all industries and national governments. When it comes to the media industry specifically, the right changes first need to be made behind the scenes, before unified and meaningful conversation about sustainability can be the norm in media content. To clarify our scope within the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development, we studied where MSPCs would be useful in the larger context of sustainable development. Since MSPCs are tools for collaboration that are intended be instrumental for sustainable development, we explored their place within the context of the FSSD to help us assess their usefulness as such. We investigated their strategic utility when being used to help shift the media industry closer to sustainability within society, within the biosphere. It also must be considered that MCPs are one of many tools and concepts that could be useful for the sustainability practices and strategies of media companies.

1.6 Case Study: Media CSR Forum, London

Our case study emerged as the only working neutrally-hosted platform which was initiated by media companies (or, industry-led) in the Western media climate today: the Media CSR Forum (MF hereafter), a UK-based initiative of media companies, originated from a cry for help to improve common practices and understanding of CSR for the UK media sector.

Acona, a consultancy that deals with sustainability developments and gives CR advice across industries, is the neutral host of this unique collaboration platform and has three 'industry clubs': one for the media sector, one for publishing companies, and another for awareness of cultural diversity (Industry Clubs, 2008).

The Media CSR Forum then, is organized and run by Acona and groups twenty of UK's largest media companies together as members. The forum is designed for media companies to talk amongst each other about CSR issues that are unique to the media sector. The group meets quarterly, and usually invites a relevant stakeholder organization to contribute to the conversation and offer expertise. Each member company pays a yearly membership fee. The forum members 'range from public service broadcasters, to academic media and conference organizations, to advertising agencies', and include 'editors, HR Directors, Company Secretaries and Auditors' (Media CSR Forum, 2010).

The collaborative work of the Media CSR Forum includes (Media CSR Forum Report, 2009):

- developing an understanding of the implications of CSR for media organizations;
- identifying areas for prioritization;
- sharing best practices;
- engaging with stakeholders and
- running collaborative projects on key issues.

The forum is an informal venue where representatives of different media businesses come together in an interpersonal discussion about CSR education, initiatives, and current practices, all of which are addressed in survey reports, workshops and conferences.

The Media CSR Forum is a unique forum model: a multi-stakeholder platform that initiates open conversation between competing companies in the media industry about sustainable practices, and has potential to serve as example for improving sustainability strategies in the media industry across the world. Inherently, MSPC models such as MF are diverse, self-organized, and interdependent. Their purpose is to reach consensus around issues relevant to the industry and individual companies, determine codes of conduct and become accountable to the society they serve. The participants in such an all-inclusive and transparent space are ideally enriched by their peers and have valuable contributions to the common goal of sustainable development both for the forum and ultimately for their own company.

Running forums for collaboration in the Media Industry ultimately aims to catalyze sustainability actions using the tactic the media industry knows best: communication. In the case of the MF model in London, ‘multi-stakeholder’ refers to all forum members who are representatives of large media companies in the UK, and the organizations that contribute to the knowledge-sharing, expertise, and enhancement of the meetings.

2. MSPCs as tools for backcasting. Key Results.

We found that the greatest potential of MSPCs today for sustainability lays in their inherent facilitation of engagement. When used correctly, MSPCs are powerful drivers of productive, open dialogues and strategic action plans. Additionally, they provide an opportunity for media companies to share their best practices when it comes to certain challenges, such as media literacy, citizenship, transparency, ownership, among other issues.

Considering the challenges and opportunities depicted by our collaborators and the introduction of Strategic Sustainable Development, it was possible to recognize how some MSPCs, such as the MF in London, met and overcome challenges and are providing insightful information that can be used for *backcasting* (see page 7) and support the efforts of the media industry to achieve compliance with sustainability. We identified 10 comprehensive, non-rival, mutually reinforcing and flexible elements for successful MSPCs based on the most important assets for sustainability today and in the future. These elements elaborate on MSPCs ability to provide a space where different stakeholders, media competitors and experts alike, can get together and explore solutions for issues that have been identified by the industry, make actions happen, monitor each other’s progress, and eventually move towards sustainability as an industry.

2.1 A vision of sustainable MSPCs. 10 Elements for Successful Development of MSPCs in the Media Industry.

1. Comply with the Sustainability Principles. Backcasting from the four principles is an intuitive and logical planning process that ensures straight-forward steps towards the vision of a successful outcome: a sustainable society where the activities of the individuals and organizations do not contribute to systematic violations of the Sustainability Principles.

2. *Model the forum as a tool for empowerment and inspiration.* Forums should engage CSR & Sustainability representatives at all levels, from every media company. MSPCs offer strength in numbers, accumulated wisdom, and have means to support new teams to get connected with the entire industry network.

3. *Host open conversations in real spaces.* MSPCs are spaces of trust amongst stakeholders of the media industry where participants freely share thoughts, ideas, and (sharing thoughts and ideas imply sharing knowledge...) concerns on behalf of the company they represent, ultimately promoting accountability to each other. All respondents mentioned interpersonal communication fosters genuine commitment.

The results demonstrated by this element make MSPCs a great opportunity to:

- enable good for peer-to-peer dialoguing and promote face-to-face interaction.
- encourage external stakeholder interaction and information sharing. Dialogues are open and inclusive to non-media parties, including NGOs, academics, government and representatives of other industries interested on interacting with media stakeholders.

4. *Keep it glocal: Address global challenges locally.* Although un-sustainable living is a global concern, MSPCs get people talking about the reality their companies face in a particular, local context.

5. *Manage diversity strategically.* Managing a diverse group of professionals who have different positions and relevance to the industry is difficult unless it is directed and managed strategically. Anticipating the diverse opinions and momentum that can come from sharing ideas and information, and having a success vision ahead of time will help to make the best out of the time the group spends together. To make this happen MSPCs organizers must be aware that:

- inclusive planning is essential
- *relevant* topics need to appeal to the industry and introduce new stakeholders to the conversation on a continuous basis

A diverse range of stakeholders in the forum discussion is extremely important to maximize the potential of assorted perspectives and talents during forum meetings. Variety will ensure

that the audience plays a role as well and the sustainability agenda will remain relevant. (Rogers and Dearing 2000, 269).

Figure 2.1 demonstrates the multifaceted elements that gather to influence relationships between the agendas of the media, the public, and policy, showing us that diversity amongst media makers is natural to the industry and useful in a collaborative setting towards change.

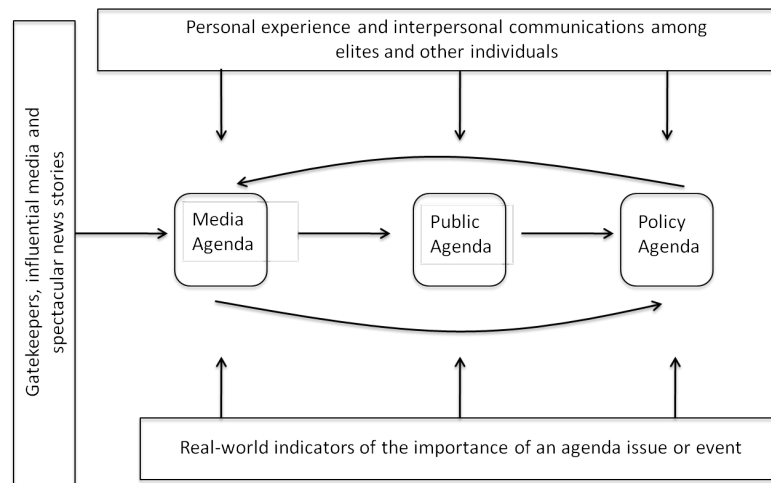


Figure 2.1. Rogers and Dearing agenda setting model (Rogers 2000)

6. *Enable a platform for raising awareness about sustainability.* MSPCs help to establish a clear current reality assessment with forum members about key sustainability challenges for the media industry as well as global sustainability challenges. As public servants, broadcasters need to leverage the quickly evolving new media atmosphere and develop interesting ways to build conversations about sustainability with society.

7. *Promote a robust forum purpose.* This means that forums need to approach meetings seeking to accomplish more than just trading ideas, or “passing around the ball.” Rather, participating media companies will find more value in engagement with something meaningful and concrete as a team and creating conditions where real action occurs, and the group “scores”. The MF teammates in London demonstrate how dialogue can trigger action and commitment, such as is the case with *media literacy*, a project developed by forum members.

8. *Enable spaces for co-creation.* Trust is important in enabling open, transparent and genuine conversation. Beyond that, the purpose of a tool for collaboration is to generate opportunities for peers to work together towards a common goal. For this to happen, it is

important for MSPCs to have a neutral host. This will help maximize collaboration by avoiding bias, and to ensure open inclusion and involvement of as many stakeholders and businesses as possible. For example, Acona, a non-media organization, hosts the activities of the MF in London, This does not imply that it is compulsory to have a non-media party as host, but that the MSPC is free of “branding” such as naming it with the name of one of the members (e.g. “Channel XY Media Forum”). MSPCs are the space where a sample group of the local media sector takes on an active role behind the scenes in functional collaboration. As such, this could lead to creation of headlines and other media materials, yet also transform internal operations strategies and mechanisms, aiming for tangible results and improvement in a company’s CSR and Sustainability practices. As the MF’s conversations occur in casual round-table settings without hidden agendas, MF manager, Dr. Toennesen pointed to the forum’s nonchalant atmosphere as a success factor of the forum; “[it] is not trying to sell anything, all the research is published and meetings are for discussion, not pitching, it’s genuinely a platform for collaboration and nothing else.”

9. Enable dynamic and transparent channels for sustainability reporting. Since annual ‘CSR/Sustainability’ reports are the tool that media companies have in common for communicating their efforts towards sustainability to their stakeholders and customers, it is important that MSPCs promote discussion about better ways for media companies to engage their audiences with their current sustainability efforts. In the next section we elaborate more on the opportunities MSPCs can explore for complying with this element.

10. Design self-sustaining MSPC models. MSPCs are not organizations that have an “official” status so their operations must be designed carefully to ensure adequate financial management and proper resource-allocation (funds, labor, time) in order to self-sustain and exist realistically as robust forums for long-term benefits and growth. It is important to design a platform model that has balanced stocks and flows of money, time and dedication by organizers. MSPCs need to be sustainable and proportionate.

2.2 The current reality of MSPCs and their outreach for CSR

This part of the research aimed to present a clear understanding of the current strengths and weaknesses of MSPCs, and allowed us to identify a set of opportunities and obstacles that provide insight for MSPC planning processes.

2.2.1 Existing opportunities

Current Level of Compliance with the Sustainability Principles. Our research does not demonstrate any significant violations of the SPs when considering our case study, nor in the concept of MSPCs in general. MSPCs are ideally not wasteful (they can be even less so than many 'green' summits) and depend on few resources to function. This being said, we identified their compliance with the sustainability principles as an enriching opportunity for more forums to be implemented in the media industry, as their overall impact contributes to sustainability while concurrently being resource-friendly.

Our assessment suggested that 'local' forums (i.e. forums that connect media companies from one urban environment where participant's travel time, distance, and costs are relatively low) inherently do not have large carbon footprints. However, we identified potential areas of impact both from the model employed by the MF in London since they meet quarterly, and from hypothetical media forums taking place in the future: gatherings depend on space and speaker availability, fees, office materials, urban transportation, amidst other logistical arrangements. Other risks of wasteful results of MSPCs could be presented as mere extravagance in the organization of the meetings (examples are below). Currently, the resource consumption is small, yet planners should be aware that material use, unless paid attention to, could be increased unnecessarily.

When these risks are analyzed heeding to compliance with the Sustainability Principles, the areas of possible impact are:

- Environmental Principles (I-III): common administrative concerns such as resource usage, energy, and carbon footprint. Planning a meeting with take-away material such as pens or brochures for a non-calculated number of participants could lead to waste of resources. Catering services also represent a potential source of waste.
- Social Principle (IV): Relevance of topics for members of an MSPC could lead to exclusion, or biasing the content towards a specific set of interests other than the mutual perspective of the participants. Potential use of the MSPC in ways that hinder society's knowledge about media CSR practices.

These are general observations, and could vary from forum to forum, as well as change throughout time according to the habits of a particular forum. We did not analyze the impacts of the particular forum activities of our case study, but rather focused on use of resources as an area of general concern for long-term forum planning.

Existing Momentum of the Case Study. The Media CSR Forum in London represents a compelling opportunity, and leads other industries by example in the ways that it is managed, structured and executed. The more we talked with the members of the MF and compared their opinions about collaborating with other members of the industry, the clearer it was that industry clubs are a lucrative next step towards unified action that begins with a myriad of business representatives in a neutral space talking about social and environmental concerns and then strategically planning together towards a better way of doing business.

Incorporating a Diverse Range of Tools and Expertise into Forum Meetings. MSPCs provide a platform for exploring a variety of sustainable management and planning tools for media companies. For example, the opportunity for incorporating the FSSD framework, or guidelines such as those from the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), thus potentially improving an organizations' rapport with the public they serve. There is also an opportunity to generate and design new tools and strategies to be internally implemented into individual media companies. Designing and using current tools such as MF's "Mapping the landscape" survey can be useful steppingstones for visioning and planning to be executed outside the forum walls.

Collaboration on Joint Projects. The MF's Media Literacy project indicates that joint projects are possible if there is enough time and devotion offered from forum participants. Theoretically, any joint project is possible, and a successful initiative offers enormous potential and possibilities if born from within a group of individuals representing some of the largest media networks and businesses worldwide.

Media's Time Advantage. Media sector MSPCs entail cutting-edge brainstorming, as the media inherently communicates and partially leads the current societal zeitgeist. When a group of people who are all 'in the know' of current headlines and issues, on a local or global level join to talk about them, there is amazing potential in the synergy created that could be effectual on the community projects and developing political campaigns who anticipate fleeting headlines in their workings. A more unified perspective from all interconnected parties presents a more productive larger picture of society.

2.2.2 Current Obstacles of MSPCs

Several external barriers emerged from within media companies (contrary to internal obstacles of MSPCs) that deeply impact these companies' use of MSPCs. These external barriers include inconsistent vision of a sustainable media company and the lack of a

strategic approach, of connection between issues, even more, lack of a common language for measuring progress across companies. Below we outline some general and practical internal barriers that MSPCs face as tools for collaboration in the media industry.

Lack of Clear Forum Purpose and Vision. To be a worthwhile space for collaboration, MSPCs must make sure their purpose is clear to the members and stakeholders. This obstacle is directly influenced by external members' activity when it comes to sustainable development, as their understanding and approach to it is often fragmented. A review of Media CSR Forum's 20 company members' CSR annual reports demonstrated:

- Popular emphasis on 'charity' work as sustainability measures is mixed with environmental activities (i.e. companies commonly claim their allocation of funds to certain local charities as genuine environmental and sustainability practices action towards change within the company).
- In the reports, summaries of a company's working conditions are placed with charitable donations to NGOs, and disclosure of financial information to auditors. Some companies decided to publish their CSR reports as a chapter of their regular reports to shareholders and ultimately, what the companies are reporting is corporate responsibility and not an entire 'sustainability' report.
- There is little connection between attending the forum meetings and having an understanding of the overall sustainability challenges for the industry. Sometimes companies were not represented in MF due to shortcomings such as having only one person in the CSR department.

The above situation results in a disjointed approach to sustainability. For example, activities of the Media CSR Forum can sometimes be considered "reactive" since they focus on one CSR issue at a time without a distant aspiration or concrete goal to aim for as a group. This happens mainly because the forum hosts representatives from every kind of media business. Various collaborators commented it would be helpful to break discussions into groups per sector, for example, radio people talking to radio people, so conversations would become more in-depth and meaningful, while keeping a unified purpose of the overall forum in mind.

Considering the way that reports present their memberships, partnerships and affiliations in indexes and awards sections, belonging to an MSPC is sometimes presented as a PR strategy, rather than having a genuine commitment to change as a company. This situation

represents a risk for long-term incentive because media companies are investing their time and resources into something somewhat ambivalent, without conviction of a clear purpose for the meetings. Thoughts shared in forum settings may be lost if participants can't justify their attendance with a vision of what specific future benefits for the company result from attending the forum meetings. A more robust forum purpose, or, *raison d'être*, to unify the forum members in a joined meaningful experience could result in less fragmentation of ideas and more tangible benefits for company members.

No Progress Indicators to Measure MSPCs Success Within the Media Companies. There are limited documents available that evaluate the overall environmental impacts of the media industry as there are of other industries. Success indicators are therefore difficult to identify and manipulate. There are no common indicators to measure if the objectives are being met and it also provides wide disarray in what readers can expect from a CSR report. The quick pace of the media sector results in yearly reports being quickly outdated, and MSPCs content may present the same situation if they have no clear direction to pursue. The lack of indicators is connected to the absence of a vision for the forum's success. This issue is addressed in the discussions' section.

Disproportionate Relevance of Topics Among Forum Members. The existing variety experience levels amongst representatives and participants of the forum was brought up a few times during interviews, and seems to be a major area of discrepancy and one of the primary inhibitors of idea-spreading. Our findings revealed that the relevance of topics is extremely important because of forum group diversity. With members from discrepant working positions and representing varying sector categories (as mentioned, such as radio, television, magazines, newspapers, etc) and different departments within these companies (CSR, Social Communications, Environmental Issues, etc) a fluid group dynamic is difficult to achieve.

Funding and Resources. Although a membership fee can help maintain the activities of a forum, small amounts of funding result in modest yet powerful run-off projects, such as MF's media literacy project.

Uneven Experience and Expertise Amongst MSPCs Members. This obstacle concerns the depth and relevance of forum discussions and could stagnate possibilities of developing joint projects and maintaining MSPCs as tools for collaboration based on meaningful conversations and co-creative efforts. This situation is related to the organizational

(corporate structure) of media companies that can sometimes hinder the internalization of CR commitments and important messages acquired from collaborative meetings. The disconnection between the forum meeting results and communicating this information outside forum walls can make redundant forum-related sustainability efforts and ideas. Initiatives taken on by participants are often “headless” due to “one man showings” at meetings as defined by various collaborators to describe one person participating on behalf of themselves instead of their entire company. In other words, many media companies still have only one or two people employed as CSR experts, and if this person fails to attend the meetings or does not transmit the relevance of the meeting outcomes and possible new CSR and sustainability strategies to the company’s management board and/or the rest of the organization, the company may lack means to develop a long term, robust and strategic approach to sustainability that is aligned with the rest of the sector’s best practices and it will be reflected in their participation in MSPCs.

Traditional Media Hype can Lead to Irrelevance of Meetings. Our interviews revealed the importance of maintaining topic relevance in the meetings, following the headlines’ command to a certain extent, and constantly spruce-up the procedures and agendas of forum meetings in order to keep such a diverse group interested, engaged and enthused. The “media hype” phenomenon is another challenge for the usage of MSPCs in the media industry, as the climate is relentlessly changing. Losing momentum is one of the risks of media dynamics; the interviewees revealed that forums have to keep themselves relevant and at the same speed the media industry moves and calls for a constant “headline topic” to maintain the interest of all involved parties. Some interviewees’ main concern (and ours) is implied in the question: How long are the MSPCs organizers going to be able to keep the pace?

2.2.3 Recommendations for MSPCs to comply with the 10 elements for success

Based on the findings of the research, the recommended actions for enabling the compliance with the 10 elements for success are sorted in two categories, strategic and operational:

- a) Strategic recommendations – aimed to apply the FSSD in the planning processes of forums and backcast from the 10 elements of success for MSPCs in the Media Industry.
 - Approach decision making (strategic guidelines) with 3 prioritization questions before taking each action: is this action using the forum’s resources adequately? Will it be a

step in the direction towards success? (or is it irrelevant to the success of the forum?) Is it a flexible steppingstone that can keep up with the pace of media headlines?

- Invite contributors, all of them providers of information, tools and eagerness to collaborate with the industry. Strategic sustainability requires patience, long-term planning, comprehensive and robust indicators - all characteristics that at first glance do not represent the dynamic, quick-pace of the media industry. Media stakeholders are fully aware of this situation and one of the objectives of their collaborative efforts is to *keep sustainability relevant* in their agendas by inviting members of other non-media related organizations, motivate each other through practice-sharing and even by pulling the strings of competition through creating a necessity for innovating towards sustainability.
- Implement tools that enhance forum meetings. For example, incorporate the FSSD and its applicability as a planning tool to help media companies with their internal visioning, operations, and backcasting from SPs towards success (in this case, sustainability for the particular company). Visioning in this case is useful because it is helpful in reminding us that, as humans, we have the talent and skills to co-create a bright future for societies to come (Steffan, 2010).

b) Operational Recommendations

The practical mechanisms of MSPCs are important for a smoothly-running forum. We think about this sort of strategic forum maintenance with a 'gardener' metaphor in mind. 'Landscaping' media forums entails knowing what to conserve (like a gardener knowing how to nurture soil), and what to 'weed-out'. The vision of a gardener is to maintain a healthy, robust, colorful, diverse and thriving garden. Many variables are at stake which need careful attending to, such as water, sunlight, soil nutrients, and so on. 'Gardeners' of forums focus on "eliminating or reducing the obstacles to growth of new initiatives...they focus on the system, gain an understanding of the organizational functions, culture and institutional structure and are able to mitigate the *constraints* to change" (Senge, 1998).

'Landscaping' a forum model could mean developing new incentives for membership as times quickly change, adapting subject matter to fickle media headlines, and continuing to build and strengthen stakeholder relationships with non-media organizations. Interactive forums amongst media companies require "a climate of constant renewal" (Robèrt et al 2007, 199). The following recommendations for MSPCs are divided in two categories: Forum Structure and Managerial Structure.

Recommendations for the Forum Structure.

- Reinvigorate and innovate regularly. MSPCs such as MF web together very busy individuals working in a quick-paced, cutting edge and volatile industry. Colloquial interpersonal communication (i.e. via telephone and face-to-face) is crucial for this dynamic and it is a 'rule of thumb' for MF, according to the manager, and a great test of the loyalty and commitment of members. Maintaining this relaxed and comfortable rapport is important to the effectiveness of MSPCs atmosphere, and can be instrumental in stimulating creativity in a non-critical or judgmental environment of peers in a common sector.
- Keep the forum "marketing" free. Forums are industry-led, so members are connected in various ways. Considering the reach of media networks, easy access to experts' participation in the meetings and debates is one of the main strengths of these forums. Marketing is not needed for a healthy forum, as its purpose as a collaboration tool is intended for sustainable development and innovation of the media industry, and not for profit. Because of the striking capacity of MSPCs as networking tools, allocating the resources into promotion is unnecessary and results in the violation of the MSPC elements.

Recommendations for the Managerial Structure:

- Maintain a Rotating Steering Team. Forum leadership should be all-inclusive and rotating. It helps to keep the agenda updated and relevant for all businesses in the industry. This way, there is also an overlap in membership so there is never an entirely new committee coming-in or representatives of one business only.
- Request a Membership Fee. Unlike some open conference settings, MSPCs, as MF manager stated, "offer incredibly good value for money and it is a major success factor, as a group these companies could do so much more than they could do individually, it is a vehicle for staying up to date with the latest thinking - conferences are usually very expensive to attend, and it costs them less to be members of the forum and have access to the same speakers in a closer –less noisy- environment". Membership happened to be one of the most divergent aspects between the case study and other forums we examined. We found that membership schemes enable better track of conversations and commitments made by participants. This does not imply that conferences lack merit,

simply that they have more obstacles to overcome when it comes to issues of follow-up and measurement as well as compliance with the elements of a robust MSPC.

- Publish an annual report of the MSPC activities. Our case study, the Media CSR Forum, demonstrated that this practice of accountability and transparency is crucial for maintaining trust and engagement among participants as well as being a very useful tool that can be used for networking, information sharing, and tracking resource allocation.

3 MSPCs: forums for knowledge collaboration & learning for sustainable innovation

We see enormous opportunity in media stakeholders brainstorming to design, implement and improve CSR practices, thus leveraging media forums to collaborate and innovate together towards sustainability. According to our research, models vary throughout the industry and most are still in development. Nevertheless, new initiatives setting the stage for the rest of the industry can result in participating companies having a competitive advantage, among other advantages, in eliminating the obsession with ownership and collaborating towards a higher purpose. We outline some considerations for CSR practices within MSPCs in the media sector below.

3.1 Guidance for Using MSPCs

3.1.1 Maximize the opportunities MSPCs represent for CSR practices. These are actions that many industries take in their CSR programs that can be enriched within the context of MSPCs:

Cross-Pollinate Key Ideas from the Forum Discussions As informal discussion forums, MSPCs need not incorporate strict guidelines and strategies to flourish as meaningful helpers with sustainability and CSR practices for media companies. The strategy needs to develop within the media companies themselves, in case-specific ways that are most relevant to the individual company. This does not mean that MSPCs cannot serve as energizing spaces to brainstorm and develop *ideas* for internal business strategies but the opposite. This is why we believe that generating methods to effectively cross-pollinate forum ideas, results, and action plans amongst colleagues after the meetings is a constructive recommendation.

Reinvigorate Forum Structures. There is opportunity in introducing more stakeholders into forum debates for educational reasons, which will help keep sustainability agendas of media

companies edge and capable of informing the public from a fundamental, coalesced point of view. Implementing more education and learning conversations into MSPCs will be useful in a few ways. Knowledge sharing from external experts could:

- Highlight latest news and ideas about sustainable development
- Promote innovative means for sustainability reporting
- Align thoughts on sustainability amongst the variety of forum members
- Catalyze dynamic discussion and brainstorming about new CSR incentives
- Help elevate companies who are less active in sustainability efforts to the level of more active companies.

Analyzing CSR reports demonstrated society's belief that most media stakeholder interaction concerns media content/product creation, and that their impact on society sources from these products only. This made us realize how unusual MSPCs can appear because it seems their implications may not yet be commonplace according to the public, and external collaborators with the industry. Notwithstanding, we believe that the long-term outcomes of MSPC discussions will cascade down to the way media content will be produced, thus potentially changing the climate of media creation from segregated, profit-driven competition, to collaborative and innovative conduct amongst companies. Ultimately, it is important that MSPCs are managed to comply as much as possible with the outlined Elements for Success .

Continue the Debate on Sustainability Reporting. To date, CSR/Sustainability reports remain to be the leading way for companies to communicate their sustainability progress. It is interesting the reports are an issue amongst forum members because companies struggle to effectively announce their sustainability activities to the public and, considering that communicating is the sole purpose of media, this discrepancy represents a serious matter that members of MF have been debating about over the last months.

Through our research, we found out that there is a disconnect between the readers and the media company's storytelling. Static reports lack an interactive channel for readers to continue the sustainability conversation with the media company.

For today's readers, it would be much more stimulating to have back and forth dialogue with the business about CSR efforts than to read through pages of, at times, contrived gloating. Some reports merely list-off awards and recognitions, and do not contain strategies, indicators, or definitions to inform the reader of how the company's business strategy is related to its CSR strategy.

Much has been said about the importance of conversations between stakeholders in creating meaningful outcomes, and how interactivity is contingent on readers finding the right story in the right place. Clearly, society is not demanding PDF formatted CSR reviews. So starting a live dialogue around these issues and involving interested readers in debates may be one possible solution. After all, effective storytelling requires a captive audienceⁱⁱ

3.1.2 Beware of constrains and plan to overcome them.

The barriers we covered in our results require time, experience and nurture to dissolve. The interesting fact is that MSPCs in the media industry are novel and vary in model type. A coherent aim for all MSPCs, however, is to continue to grow and strengthen as platforms. Most barriers are symptoms of bringing together a very diverse sample of representatives from the media industry (in the case study model, MF) so that experience and motives for meeting attendance is often varied and disproportionate. We reflect on some noted challenges below.

Too Much Ado about Nothing...? To avoid the image of a team of forum members aimlessly passing around a figurative soccer ball of ideas without direction or the intention of scoring, relevance of forum topics is an urgent prerequisite for successful MSPC outcomes. We noticed that collaborating towards innovation is not a priority for many companies, and they seem to be unaware of the incentives for CSR staff to participate in forums. This could be due to a lack of incentives, or tangible outcomes from gatherings. Unless forums establish a comprehensive direction and vision, they will continue to be closed knowledge sharing platforms, rather than open and organic spaces for innovation and strategic planning.

We must keep in mind that MSPCs such as MF can be third parties who join stakeholders together. As platforms, they do not inherently seek profit. Yet our results indicate that as they are not as effective without sufficient investment and we recommend that media companies include funding for MSPCs as part of their sustainability strategies.

Irrelevance of Topics and Lack of Indicators of Success

The moment that someone considers the participation in an MSPC is irrelevant for their companies' strategies, the incentive to collaborate dies. Motivation plays a key role. Topics also determine the attendance and they have to be relevant for the majority.

Lack of success indicators is a barrier because if members invest in fees and attend meetings without seeing results, the forum seems to be a lack-luster effort, and could diminish zeal and enthusiasm. Thus, striving for 'low-hanging fruit' during gatherings (easy actions that reps who attend meetings can do in their role/position to make them feel productive/proud/effective) is a more motivating approach.

CONCLUSION

We would like to acknowledge that Multi-stakeholder Platforms for Collaboration, in the way we have outlined them, are certainly transferable to other industries. In fact, we see great potential in the flexibility and momentum of the studied model to be applied to other industries. The traditional way of doing business is undergoing a movement towards more transparent and collaborative ideals, and an incremental product to grow out of this are open forums where various companies share their ideas and insight about sustainable business operations. Our view of an ideal future corporate climate entails this sort of collaboration leading to a decentralized field of enterprises having a positive impact on nature and communities. Further research is desirable in order to explore ways that media companies, either private or public, can use MSPCs as a strategic tool for collaboration to cooperate in innovating the industry complying with the sustainability principles, and to analyze various interactions happening "behind the scenes" of their sector.

We have found that Multi-Stakeholder Platforms for Collaboration in the Media Industry can be instrumental for the shift towards knowledge sharing and innovation for sustainability within individual media companies. Platforms and channels for dialogue carry a strategic function aligned with relevant CSR issues and can bring about a holistic and synergistic perspective of reality. The intrinsic nature of media channels means a shared perspective of reality coming from the industry has the capacity to transfer, and create a vast and potent ripple effect on society's intellectual terrain and, ultimately, be manifested through the actions of individuals. Thus results have indicated that MSPCs towards sustainability in the media industry are a tremendous opportunity for eliminating the gap of connectivity and trust between the public and the media industry.

Taking a look now at the uniqueness of the developments within the media industry that we have uncovered, we are pleased to report that MSPCs contribute to the media industry's innovation for sustainable development. According to virtually everyone we spoke with, MSPCs help to identify issues common to the industry, discuss these issues and their implications for business operations, share best practices, initiate ideas for innovation and further actions within media companies, engage in useful dialogue and learning with a network of relevant organizations, audit and check the impact of current CSR work, and be on top of relevant issues and sustainability headlines for the public.

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FOOTNOTES

ⁱ <http://www.naturalstep.org/>

ⁱⁱ From the entry to "The Guardian's" blog written by Guillen, Katan, Xu on March 23, 2010