Sustainable Consumption and Mass Communication: A German Experiment

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L Reisch, Clive L. Spash, Sabine Bietz

Institute for Multi-Level Governance & Development
Department of Socio-Economics
Vienna University of Economics and Business

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Abstract

How to change economic behaviour and achieve sustainable consumption? This paper reports on using television and internet communication as a means of engaging the least interested sections of society with respect to environmental problems and sustainability issues. The theory behind developing such communication is described and the importance of social psychological factors brought to the fore. Initial results indicating the success of the approach employed in actual broadcasts on television in Germany are then reported. Some concerns over use of the media and public engagement are also discussed.

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Sustainable Consumption and Mass Communication: A German Experiment

Lucia Reisch[1], Clive L. Spash[2] and Sabine Bietz[3]

1. Copenhagen Business School, Department of Intercultural Communication, and Management, Pocelænshaven 18.1 DK-2000 Frederiksberg.

2. CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, GPO Box 284, Canberra ACT 2601, Australia.

3. University of Calw GmbH, Badstrasse 27, D-75365 Calw, Germany.

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INTRODUCTION

Changing consumption patterns to be more environmentally friendly or sustainable is becoming a major issue but has been a recognised problem for some time. Various threads of thought came together in the second half of the twentieth century, and these formed the basis for the modern critique by ecological economists of standard economic growth as a means for increasing human welfare. The idea that more consumer goods increase absolutely levels of well-being was attacked theoretically by Hirsch's (1977) social limits to growth and empirically by Easterlin (1974). The physical constraints on material throughput were made evident by the work of Georgescu-Roegen (1971) and Kneese, Ayres and d'Arge (1970) on incorporating the laws of thermodynamics into economic models. This led Daly (1977) to recommend a steady-state economy which respects the need for limits on the scale of human activity. However, achieving such a state would mean addressing the role of corporations in promoting consumerism as evident in the works of Kapp (1950; 1978) and Galbraith (1958; 1979)[4]. The idea of the consumer being sovereign in the market place and so determining what is produced is then debunked (Mishan, 1969). Thus, sustainability policy emphasises the need to develop practical approaches by which consumption behaviour can be changed (Reisch, 2004).

The complete picture as sketched above is far from having been adopted in political or policy circles despite the concept of "sustainable consumption" moving to the international policy agenda (eg. OECD, 1997). Rather than controlling consumption, recycling materials and increasing production efficiency have tended to be the dominant means supposed to decouple environmental degradation from

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[4] Kapp's concern was more clearly with the manipulation of marketing and advertising and the waste of resources involved. Galbraith in his "revised sequence" has a broader theory of political economy in which corporation and state work together to ensure there is adequate aggregate demand as well as management of specific consumer demand by the firm.

economic growth. The point that even very efficient economies can be massive per capita and absolute consumers of resources seems to have been missed. Growth of income and material throughput by means of industrialisation and mass consumerism remains the basic economic aim of western democracy. This obsession with growth is regarded as a success story in terms of the "development" of modern economies; this is in spite of persistent inequitable distribution within and between nations, and the expanding scale of environmental problems. The north-south divide in terms of resource consumption is meant to be addressed by more consumption for all, despite the massive resource imports needed to maintain current northern consumption patterns. The growing economies of China and India are following the same route to "success". Thus, control of the most politically dominant and globally pervasive environmental problem of recent years, the enhanced Greenhouse Effect, has been framed as a "pro-growth strategy" rather than a major barrier to continued orthodox economic growth (Spash, 2007a). The question of consumption "for what" is not one mainstream economist's or politician's wish to ask, let alone answer.

This leaves the policy agenda on sustainable consumption in danger of becoming a merely rhetorical reflection of concern. On the one hand there is an increasing recognition of the need to control consumption and even a sense of urgency, while on the other the characteristics, scale and scope of the problem of unsustainable consumption are substantively left unexplored. Røpke (2006) identifies five research questions for ecological economists: (i) How can consumption be conceptualized? (ii) What are the environmental impacts of consumption? (iii) What are the driving forces behind growing consumption? (iv) How does consumption relate to the quality of life? (v) How can consumption patterns be

changed?   This last question is perhaps the most challenging because it raises questions as to the role of individual choice in the modern structure of political and economic systems. Addressing that question is the aim of this chapter.

The emphasis of writers like Kapp and Galbraith upon the institutions of the market as controlling behaviour have more recently been supplemented by theories on the psychology of consumption behaviour. Socio-psychological explanations of consumption focus upon humans as embedded in specific social relationships. This adds a behavioural explanation of consumption to the socio-economic aspects related to the institutional set-up of the economy, and the historical socio-technological formation of lifestyles (Røpke, 1999). There is then a concern as to the role consumption activities play in defining human self-identity. From the catch phrase "you eat what you are", to brand images and open display of brand labels, to "keeping-up with the Joneses", modern consumerism emphasises the construction of a self image and a social role. This means individuals are not just manipulated by corporations but have become complicit in their own manipulation.

Some Green non-governmental organisations have then attempted to break this loop with explicit recognition of the psychology of consumption. Perhaps the best example in this regard is the publication *Adbusters* which employs market advertising approaches in satirical ways to promote anti-consumerism and raise individual awareness. Governments face the same problem if they are to remove and control activities creating pollution, destroying ecosystems and causing biodiversity loss. However, attempts at reaching the disinterested mass of the population with a sustainable consumption message seem relatively rare or restricted to crisis (eg. energy or water shortages). There is then a lack of research as to the potential means and their effectiveness.

In this chapter we explore how behavioural change in everyday consumption patterns might be addressed. The theoretical basis is described in the next section in terms of the psychological aspects of consumerism. This emphasises the importance of positive and emotive messages channelled through media relevant to a target social group. Next a case study is presented where such an approach was implemented. Specifically we report on the attempt by "Project Balance"[5] to improve interest in sustainable behaviour in Germany amongst the disinterested and poorly educated (see also, Reisch, 2006; Reisch and Bietz, 2007). This employed a mass communication strategy using broadcast TV reports on a popular science show. This was combined with linked multiple media to allow follow-up by interested viewers. The project involved collaboration between media, science, corporations, sustainability actors and consumer watchdogs. The aim was to raise the level of engagement with sustainable consumption issues. This was monitored and analysis was conducted from media, marketing, and consumer research perspectives. Initial consumer research results are reported. We conclude by discussing some of the implications.

Understanding Socio-Psychological Aspects of Consumption

For more than two decades, consumer research has investigated individual and institutional limits preventing sustainable consumption behaviour ("barriers"), and factors enabling the achievement of more sustainable lifestyles ("drivers"). Until the 1990s, this research was conducted under the labels of "environmental" and "pro-social" behaviour (Reisch and Røpke 2004). Following this route, empirical work on

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[5] The term was chosen to denote a sustainable lifestyle which aims to balance economic, ecological, and social goals. The term 'sustainability' was rejected as fuzzy and difficult to comprehend. Sustainable consumption was intentionally framed as well-being within a balanced lifestyle; resembling what is now termed lifestyle of health and sustainability (LOHAS), see www.lohas-com. However, LOHAS predominantly targets higher status socio-economic/income groups while the "balance lifestyle" also targets lower ones.

attitudes by social psychologists led to the development of various attitudinal scales by which specific behaviour might be explained on the basis of pro-environmental attitudes.

An early and still popular pro-environmental scale is the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) designed by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978) using 12 statements, with which respondents agree or disagree on a Likert-type (4-point) scale, to capture key aspects of environmentalism. This has been applied to monitor changing environmental awareness and in the prediction of economic behaviour eg. using the NEP to measure pro-environmental attitudes to help explain willingness-to-pay for environmental improvements (Kotchen and Reiling, 2000). The NEP and pro-environmental attitudes have been linked to value orientations (biospheric, social altruistic and egoistic) by Stern (2000). This value-belief-norm model of human behaviour generalises Schwartz (1977) norm activation theory by postulating that adverse consequences to valued objects activate personal norms, such as a sense of obligation to take pro-environmental actions. Thus, for example, people who value other species highly will be concerned about environmental conditions that threaten such species (biospheric value orientation) while those who care about other people will be concerned for their health and well-being as a result of changing environmental quality (social-altruism). The aim of such work is to explain the motives and beliefs underlying specific actions.

In terms of consumption behaviour the engagement of individuals in the framing of the environment as an aspect of the market place becomes important. If the environment, or aspects of it, can be regarded as just a commodity then economists can limit their policies to market based instruments, i.e. valuing change in monetary terms, spreading markets to new areas (eg. tradable carbon permits) and using

monetary incentives to achieve desired behaviours. Evidence on the problems associated with this outlook has then arisen from employing motivational measures in hypothetical markets. For example, pro-environmental attitudes have been hypothesised to be determinants of WTP leading to protest bidding by environmentalists because they are more likely to hold deontological or rights-based beliefs which reject economic consequentialist and utilitarian positions (Spash, 1997). Such trade-off rejection is consistent with holding lexicographic preferences (Spash, 2000), and confronts the consumerist approach to valuing the environment with a belief system which rejects notions of commensurability (Aldred, 2006). This creates problems for economists trying to extend commoditisation to the environment because individuals may not just refuse to engage but may also give monetary values unrelated to trade prices (Spash, 2006). Psychological motivations then become key to understanding behaviour and designing policy instruments. Thus, simple economic approaches using taxes or subsidies as incentives to change behaviour can have unexpected consequences and crowd out moral and norm based motives to action (Frey and Jegen, 2001).

Clearly then, in developing effective intervention strategies, knowledge about underlying psychological variables is indispensable. Research has addressed the role of stable dispositions as well as specific environmental cognitions and emotions (Kals and Maes 2002). The explanatory power of generalized personality traits and broad beliefs (eg. general perceptions of control, altruism and social responsibility) on various sustainable behaviours have proven to be low and inconsistent (eg. Bamberg 2003). However, specific environmental cognitions—morals, ecological awareness, control beliefs and justice appraisals—exert strong stabilising effects on sustainable behaviour (Montada and Kals 2000). Following Shaver's (1985) model

of responsibility, the attribution of ecological responsibility to oneself, as well as to external agents (eg. politicians, corporations), is based upon a general awareness of ecological risks (eg. pollution of soil, air and water, consequences of the greenhouse effect, the risks of damage to the ozone layer, decrease of biodiversity) and belief in ability to effectively reduce those risks. Moral reasoning and normative messages over what constitutes a right or wrong action is a proven motivational basis for overcoming various factors (eg. interest-shifts, social traps, lock-ins, and high-cost perceptions) (Cialdini 2003; Cialdini et al., 2006). This provides at least two entry points for intervention programmes. First, they can aim at creating risk awareness via providing information and knowledge. Second, they can provide solutions in order to increase an individual's perceived behavioural control (eg. showing concrete, low cost, alternative behaviours).

While useful, this approach neglects the impact of various categories of emotions. This omission can be explained by the prevalence of rational choice-based action theories such the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and the Theory of Trying (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990). A core element in these models is the proposition that individuals are motivated to act on the basis of beliefs about consequences, cost and benefits, and importance. The basic theoretical characterisation, with respect to individual psychology, is of humans as restricted, resourceful, expecting, evaluating, and maximizing (Coleman and Fararo 1992). The model has been informed and influenced by mainstream economic theory.[6] Emotions seem incompatible with such

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[6] Viewing consumers as much more than just the mainstream economists 'rational' decision maker has also been supported and strengthened by a variety of research relating economics and psychology. Gintis (2000) provides an overview of experimental results in this regard. Earl (1990) distinguishes different interactions between the two disciplines and explains how "psychological economics" challenges economists seeking to limit the use made of ideas from psychology. He sees

a characterisation of humans and so are absent. Only within the past decade or so have a significant number of studies in consumer research appeared in the literature that involve emotions (for an overview see Laros and Steenkamp 2005).

The emotional foundations of sustainable (environmental) behaviour can be observed in negative and positive ways.   Examples of negative emotions are expressing indignation about other peoples' lack of pollution control, anger about too much pro-environmental decision-making, and guilt about ones own unsustainable consumer decisions. Positive emotions may be expressed as affinity or simply love of Nature.   Whereas certain emotions can be traced back to moral cognitions, feelings of love toward Nature appear to be based upon experience which might be made in relationship with significant others (McShane, 2007; Montada and Kals 2000). In contrast, ecological fear and experienced ecological burdens appear less important. As Kals and Maes (2002, 113) state:

> "With regard to the socio-ecological dilemma, the significance of a moral base makes sense, as there is only little direct personal benefit derived from sustainable behaviour. This moral dimension is reflected not only cognitively, but also experienced emotionally. […] Sustainability should not only be appraised cognitively but also as an internalized norm, which is interconnected with personal experiences and even feelings of love".

Indeed, the emotional dimension of sustainable behaviours can be taken into account in intervention programmes where the experience of positive emotions plays a key role.

The characteristics of environmental problems are particularly challenging in terms of designing interventions to change behaviour, i.e. visible costs and invisible

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inputs from psychology as enhancing understanding of, and improving ability to predict, behaviour normally viewed as the preserve of economics.

benefits and consequences; benefits to geographically and temporally remote third parties; intangibles that are difficult to portray; the need for long term engagement due to large amounts of complex information; the need to change basic values; and the need to get outside opinion leaders on board. Following the work of Andreasen (1995), approaches to induce behavioural change in consumers can be regarded as forming five strategies:

1) Education: bearing the risk of "boomerang effects", i.e. behavioural responses exactly opposite to those desired (eg. Ringold, 2002). Anger, defiance, denial, and other negative responses might occur since consumers often do not want to be "lectured" on their behaviour (eg. Wolburg, 2006).

2) Persuasion: as used in social advertising. The focus is on arguments and motivational "hot buttons" to change behaviour. This "selling approach" can be perceived as too pushy.

3) Behaviour modification: as found in behavioural theory which stresses learning by reward and punishment. The approach can be very costly which restricts application to individuals or small groups. The underlying psychological model is also narrow and the connotations of enforced behaviour may be politically contentious.

4) Social influence: using campaigns directed at influencing community norms and collective behaviour. While promising, the approach requires situations in which social issues are well understood and norms accepted. Effectiveness will be determined by the pressures to conform. The behaviour to be influenced needs to be socially important (eg. health) and visible (eg. smoking). Appeals to group norms may be less effective the more individualism is emphasised in society.

5)   Social marketing: combining features from the above four approaches in a comprehensive and integrated manner. It uses the "Four P's" (product, place, price, promotion) of marketing as tools, and relies on market research with careful segment targets (eg. Kotler, Roberto and Lee, 2002; Smith 2006). Andreasen (1995, 2001) provides empirical evidence supporting the potential of social marketing to influence consumers, particularly in the context of human health.

The use of a social marketing concepts based on positive emotions and entertaining features—"ecotainment" (Lichtl, 1999)—is hypothesised to be more effective than both the hitherto predominant fact-oriented style of consumer information, as well as, negatively framed, fear and threat approaches. Positive emotional appeals enable a target audience to move from non-interest and ignorance to contemplation of behavioural change (Monahan, 1995). In contrast, appeals to fear prove counterproductive—provoking defence mechanisms and inattention (Hale and Dillard, 1995). Prior research has shown that a fact oriented style at best reaches the "usual suspects" (i.e. the more educated, information prone and interested consumers) but not the poorly educated.

Designing and Conducting an Empirical Application in Germany

Project Balance was set up as both a trendsetting initiative to stimulate sustainability communication amongst the public, and an academic research project to assess factors of success and failure. In its dual approach, the project design resembled what was termed "action research" in the 1970s (Isaac and Michael, 1987). The project was designed with partners from academia, the media, and media research

i.e. both practitioners and theorists.[7]   The research was conceptualised as an iterative and on-going process, rather than a one-way activity with a neatly defined beginning and end.   This then resembles more an upward spiral of exploration: planning, structuring, pre-testing, implementing, monitoring, and re-planning.   Figure 1 sketches the design of the project.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The Trendsetting Initiative

Permanent information overload is a problem in modern economies.   For example, Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg (2003) estimate that less than five percent of actively sent corporate communication directed to consumers is received.   TV viewer research shows that "zapping" or channel changing, and other advert avoidance strategies, are widely employed (eg. Gunter, Furnham and Lineton 1995; Siddarth and Chattopadhyay 1998).   Overall, consumers show less interest in classic corporate one-sided "push-communication".   Hence the rise of the alternative "pull-media", such as the internet, where recipients select customized contents and have a dialogue option to exchange views and voice their opinions (Web 2.0 communication).

Project Balance aimed for public engagement and discourse on sustainable consumption and production using a range of push and pull-media.   Various TV reports were employed as a teaser aiming to redirect viewers to become users,

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[7] Project Balance was funded by the German Ministry of Research and Education (Project No.07BAL01). It ran from 2004-2007 with a budget of €1.5million. Main researchers were Clemens Schwender (Jacobs University of Bremen), Lucia Reisch (Copenhagen Business School) and Martin Kreeb (Hohenheim University). In order to receive on-going feedback from other stakeholders, a Consultancy Board of Advisors was established composed of academic experts from environmental psychology, sustainable development, Green marketing, ethics, communications research, as well as of practitioners from non government organisations (NGOs), consumer organizations, the German Council of Sustainable Development, and the leading German media research institution "Grimme Institut" among others.

readers, and finally "doers". The basic hypothesis was that the use of emotionalized and entertaining messages directed at the disengaged "broad masses" could successfully promote attention, interest, positive attitudes, knowledge seeking, and change behavioural intentions regarding sustainable consumption. The approach involved two-steps: first, gaining viewers' attention, interest, and sympathy via social marketing tools triggering (mostly) positive emotions, and second, transmitting convincing cognitive messages informing and confirming prior attitudes towards behavioural change.

In consumer behaviour research, high-involvement behaviours such as the ones discussed in this chapter are conceptualized as being developed through definable stages. Several models of behavioural change have been proposed (Maibach and Cotton, 1995). Project Balance selected the Transtheoretical Model of Behaviour Change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1984), which has undergone considerable field testing mainly in the public health domain (eg. Mohr et al., 2001). The model describes five stages:

Stage 1: Pre-contemplation, in which consumers do not think of the behaviour as being appropriate for them. This can be due to pure ignorance, presumed irrelevance, or, more difficult to change, principles and norms.

Stage 2: Contemplation, in which consumers think about and evaluate recommended behaviours, and also look for more information.

Stage 3: Preparation, in which consumers have decided to act and prepare, eg. search for brands and stores.

Stage 4: Action, in which consumers initiate a new behaviour.

Stage 5: Confirmation, in which consumers are committed to the behaviour and have no desire or intention to return to the earlier behaviour.

Ideally, intervention strategies target consumers as classified by the five groups. Communication tasks appropriate to each are then to create awareness and interest, change values, motivate behavioural change, create action, and maintain change (Andreasen, 1995). The aim is to move consumers to their respective next stage, rather than attempt to bring everyone to "confirmation". General media may achieve early stage transformation while the latter stages are more likely to be reached with tailored messages and media such as print, internet and podcasts.

While the five stages provide a conceptual framework, in practice Stages 2 and 3 are closely intertwined and separating individuals is difficult. Moreover, consumers may be in different stages with respect to different consumption domains, eg. food and travel. Bearing these limitations in mind, a questionnaire was administered to aid classification by stage. This included questions regarding subject's knowledge about the concept of sustainability, their viewing preferences and interests (i.e. interest in TV programs on environmental and social issues), their general view on the environmental debate and their individual responsibility, as well as their attitudes and behaviour towards "Green" and fair consumption.[8] The results were then compared with available data from representative survey results on "Green" and "average" German consumers[9]. This allowed a crude classification according to the five stages, but proved sufficient to evaluate the impact of project communication stimuli.

Project Balance focused on the initial stages, namely the generation of interest, attention and attitude formation amongst people who have no or low interest

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[8] Questionnaires, in German only, available from the lead author.

[9] The major source profiling the "average" German is the biannual survey of environmental awareness, concern and attitude of German consumers (Kuckartz and Rheingans-Heintze, 2004, 2006). Among other relations it shows the strong correlation between awareness level and level of education, it also provides data on the average knowledge of the concept of sustainability and other green issues.

in sustainability issues. In order to achieve maximum target group exposure, the sustainability messages had to be placed in media channels that the target audience would normally choose. Channels were carefully selected regarding core viewer characteristics, reach, frequency, impact, and cost. During the project, cross media spin-offs—a website, a print magazine, and a podcast show—were developed and target group exposure was increased.[10]

Short TV 'Balance Reports' were co-developed by the project team and TV editorial staff. These were aired between September 2004 and October 2006 on the TV show "Welt der Wunder" ("World of Wonders"). On each show, one of six reports was a Balance Report, introduced by the show's host. "Welt der Wunder" was the first and, at the time, one of the most popular science programs of its kind aired on commercial television in Germany. Its motto was "science made easy—fascinating stories delivered with a dash of levity".[11] During the project, the show was running weekly on a commercial TV channel at prime time on Saturday evenings and being rerun on Sunday afternoons and Monday late nights. Additionally, the show appeared three times per week on a news channel (N-TV). In addition, from 2006, the Balance Reports were aired once per week on the call-in TV show "Schau dich schlau!" ("World of Wonders—Watch yourself Smart!"), a half-hour version of the full hour evening show.

Altogether, 34 Balance Reports were aired and each reached about two to three million viewers per week. The Balance Reports fell into two categories. First, there were those which presented companies committed to sustainable production or services; here, specific branded sustainable products or services were showcased

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[10] For more detail and statistics, see the final report on Project Balance, available from the lead author. As regards the other media employed: The print run of the "Welt der Wunder" magazine is still growing (Bauer Media 2008), while the Balance podcast was discontinued in 2007.

[11] See the show's website at www.weltderwunder.de/sds/Moderatoren/HendrikHey/

(eg. organic baby food, new type of childcare, alternative living in a tree house, bio fuel, renewable resource loan, alternative paving, and alternative oil filter for cars). Second were a variety of reports on sustainability that were not company-specific but showcased sustainable products or product-use in general, such as fair trade coffee, hybrid cars, organic meat, gas-saving driving, sustainable lumber, detergent, or the sustainable cultivation of apples.

The reasons for such a design and the cooperation with "Welt der Wunder" can be summarized as follows:

1) Free access was provided to detailed audience research data—collected by the prestigious German *Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung* (GfK) in Nuremberg— on the basis of non-profit cooperation with the producer of "Welt der Wunder". Usually such data are too expensive for academic researchers to access. This enabled tracking of viewers' switch-on switch-off behaviour for every second of the programme and advertisements.

2) Market research showed that "Welt der Wunder" and RTL II's core audience matched the target desired being both less educated and less interested in environmental and social issues than the average German TV viewer. During the project this was verified based on GfK's viewer profiles.

3) "Welt der Wunder" was to date the most popular science programme on German TV with about four million viewers per show. The show was aired weekly during prime time and repeated several times during the week on different channels.

4) The show's host was also the producer and had, in the past decade, become a well known celebrity and himself a "brand" in Germany. His high credibility encouraged audiences to pay particular attention to messages delivered and

presented by him. The host was motivated by personal beliefs about the necessity of a more sustainable lifestyle and so add to the information presented in the TV reports.

5) Last but not least, the editorial staff, scriptwriters, and the producer were open-minded and interested enough to embrace the project group's continuous "sustainability coaching" efforts. In practice, this is highly relevant since the freedom of the press forbids external intrusion in the production of a programme. The content and design of TV reports are the full responsibility of the broadcasters. After recent heated public debate and legal conflicts at national and European level on surreptitious TV advertising, product placement, and issue placement, journalists and programme makers have become very sensitive to undue influence in their work.

Research into the effectiveness of health communication has shown that the more effective campaigns use multiple media and repetition of a single message either in the form of retransmission of the original message or in slight variations on the basic theme (eg. Coffman 2002; Dorfman et al., 2002; Freimuth et al., 2001). Also, the use of the news media as a means of increasing visibility has been shown to be successful (Backer et al., 1992). Hence, it was expected that a "hook-up" cross-media strategy transmitting multiple repeated messages on multiple channels, tailored to the different sub-target groups, would be effective in creating attention and knowledge. The aim was also to redirect TV viewers to the more informative website, the magazine, or—especially for the young age group—to podcast shows on sustainability issues.

The Research Project

The accompanying research was split into three modules: media research, consumer research, and marketing research. There was close interaction between these research groups, in particular between media and consumer components. Figure 1 sketches the project modules and their core research methods.

Various data was collected from public participants prior to the start of Balance Report TV broadcasting. First, there was a public sample (N=440) of focus group participants and second, there was a convenience sample of internet users (N=881). The focus groups were pre-selected to represent the typical Welt der Wunder viewer, i.e. younger, less educated, and less interested in environmental issues than the average German TV viewer. This sample was screened to select only those who had not previously watched the Balance Reports. The internet users came from the Welt der Wunder website, could participate in an online game, and were then exposed to Balance Reports. The stage separation questionnaire, mentioned above, was administered to the focus group sample prior to any Balance Report exposure.

Focus groups were performed between February and November 2006. The target group members were specifically selected according to their similarity to the project's target group profile from groups such as students of vocational schools, secondary schools teenager, driving schools, but also hospital administrators, non-professional sports teams and, as a control group, university graduates. For the focus group discussion, a standardized questionnaire was designed to measure emotional appeal, attractiveness, acceptability, and relevance of the Balance Reports, and to collect socio-demographic data. Recall of the Reports' information was also tested.

Consumer research carried out reception analysis and content analysis. Reception analysis used both direct (eg. questionnaires) and proxy measures (eg. switch-on switch-off data). Data were retrieved mainly from focus group discussions, expert group discussions, individual interviews, case studies with companies (on their sustainable marketing strategies), and market response analysis. Content analysis addressed the perceived contents of the messages in the TV reports. This was investigated in focus groups as well as via computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA), performed with ATLAS.ti. Moreover, in web-based questionnaires, viewers were profiled via available GfK data and standardized instruments measuring their propensity to environmental and socially conscious consumption. The criteria of analysis were: comprehensibility of the message, attractiveness (measured by polarity profiles and direct questions), emotional appeal (before and after design), acceptability, and relevance (with the proxy measure of remembrance of contents and emotions).

Special attention was given to the measurement of emotions. While lately there has been a significant increase in research into affective processes in consumer behaviour (Richins, 1997), information about the nature of emotions and their measurement are still scarce. In the consumer research module of Project Balance, the measurement of emotions was performed with the German version (Krohne et al., 1996) of the PANAS questionnaire (Watson and Clark, 1988). Furthermore, split-second data from both media research (switch-on switch-off) and the computer assisted qualitative data analysis via ATLAS.ti of the reports proved extremely useful. This allowed viewers' reactions to be related to tiny bits of narration or format so that patterns and correlations in the data could be discerned (Schwender et al., 2007, 2008).

RESULTS

The results reported in this chapter focus on the early stages of behavioural change. This is in line with the main challenge of Project Balance which was to stimulate interest and attitude change in consumers with limited interest in and/or knowledge of sustainable lifestyles.[12] Moreover, results are initial and are hence presented on a less detailed level than will be found in later publications.

Creating Awareness and Interest

Following the rough classification approach described above, about half of the focus group study subjects were classified as being in the stage of pre-contemplation. For example, in 7 out of 11 focus groups, not one participant could roughly define the term "sustainability". This is below average for Germany. Also, interest in organic and fair trade goods as well as in respective media programming was below average. Addressing this group requires showing and explaining the relevance of new behavioural possibilities, for instance, to try an alternative "fair trade" coffee. The aim was to communicate that there is an alternative to conventional products and that the latter bear problems of sustainability (knowledge) as well as that the proposed behaviour is not antithetical to values of the majority of society, or may even be fashionable. The behaviour is then to be associated with potential for improved well-being by presenting benefits in a frame that creates positive emotions and attitudes.

Online viewer surveys conducted on the project website straight after a Balance Report was aired, as well as focus group results, showed that the Balance

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[12] Monitoring and measurement of actual behavioural change—let alone its stabilization into a routine—was outside the remit of a design where data could only be derived indirectly from company interviews and market response analysis. This more ambitious task would require a panel design or a form of ethnographic research. Although, the later stages might be approximated using measurement of behavioural intentions.

Reports were overwhelmingly regarded as interesting, informative and attractive. Thus, the disinterested target group was engaged despite the Balance Reports dealing with issues more challenging than the other standard items in the show. Evidence from switch-off analysis revealed that the fear (aired by TV officials in the early phases of Project Balance) of an immediate switch-off reaction, when such "difficult" topics are presented, proved to be unfounded. On a more technical note, the clips were rated by viewers (via polarity profiles) as "authentic, modern and clear". Most importantly for this project, the majority of the clips were able to create the positive emotions which were intended (Mocigemba and Otto, 2005). The qualitative analysis (CAQDA, focus groups) showed that, in a nutshell, the emotional value of the reports was much more decisive than the content.

Changing Perspectives and Motivating Action

As explained above, Stages 2 and 3 are so closely interlinked that, in practice, it was neither possible nor sensible to distinguish the two. More than a third of the focus group study subjects could be classified as currently fitting into these stages where proposed behaviours are considered and evaluated and action is taken to seek more information on alternatives.

In Stage 2, explaining the benefits and reducing perceived costs of behavioural alternatives are important. For example, one TV report showed the thrifty use of compact detergent, focused on the individual benefits (cost, environment, health) of "washing correctly". At the same time, it conducted explicit "demarketing" by emphasising individual and environmental costs of the common alternative (filler boosted washing powder). This specific report was rated as interesting and motivating in both polarity profiles and focus groups. Focus group

sessions revealed that it gave viewers new perspectives and made them think about alternatives.

For those consumers who have reached the preparation stage, it is important to provide easily accessible information and hands-on service guidance in order to reduce transaction costs to a minimum. Moreover, consumers at this stage are ready for a more extended information search in different media. The three to eight minute TV report is limited as an information carrier.

A solution was to guide viewers explicitly, via prompts from the show's host, to the website where additional material (for example, on the European "wash right" campaign, a voluntary initiative by the large washing detergent producers) and service tools (for example a service module that computed the optimal amount of detergent when the user entered her zip code) were provided. Log file analysis showed, that about half of the online users of the Balance Website made use of its offers of more detailed information. About 10% of this group opted for re-viewing the Balance Reports of the latest shows, and then actively searched for more information on the "Welt der Wunder" homepage. Also, an analysis of email reactions and requests (which were collected by the programme producer within two-weeks of each report being aired), showed that viewers did engage in active information searching, some asking for product specific information and distributors.[13] Another indicator was the good internet user participation rate (N=881) in the "sustainability quiz" designed and employed as an online education tool.

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[13] For instance, one report showcased on a new oil filter with which car owners can retrofit their cars and save drastically on oil change in passenger vehicles. This report created about 400 emails within several days and almost 200 direct requests to the producer of the oil filter.

In all these interactions, the one-way passive TV information was supplemented by an active and selective information search process with the option of two-way communication. This is of utmost importance. Consumers do not make their decisions in a social vacuum; rather, they are part of families and peer groups, colleagues at work, virtual communities, and neighbourhoods. These groups act as "communication buffers" in commenting on and evaluating information, attitudes, and consumption decisions of the individual. They can act as facilitators, as sources of (contradictory or supporting) information, and as sources of social pressure. Relevant others—people from these communities or celebrities—can act as role models and opinion leaders. These tendencies were also exploited in Project Balance by actively involving the (already existing) virtual "Welt der Wunder" community and by trying to stimulate discussions.

In a market reaction analysis carried out with the public relations and/or marketing departments of companies showcased by "Welt der Wunder", it was reported that employees of companies in the TV reports had liked the presentation of their company as a sustainability leader and appreciated being approached by friends and family who had also watched the programme. Such "halo-effects" can be expected to have positive motivational and identity building impacts both internally (for employees) and externally (for consumers). Moreover, as we found in the surveys and focus groups, viewers often remembered small interesting facts presented in the TV reports, which they then pass on as "conversation pieces" and status markers to others. This shows some of the possibilities for advancing sustainability issues in public discourse.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Reaching the mass of disinterested consumers, who are busy in their everyday lives of work, family and relationships, is a major challenge. There appears some good potential for the "ecotainment" approach, at least for the early stages of a consumer behavioural change process. The hypothesis that stimulating positive emotions can act as a motivator seems to have been supported. However, whether emotion works to increase consumer interest in and liking of more sustainable consumption alternatives seems to heavily depend on whether the target group relates to the themes presented, clip design chosen, wording and music used. A credible and appealing sender of the sustainability message also proved important. This is actually bad news for most governmentally driven consumer information on sustainable consumption.

There are also a number of pitfalls associated with the approach for serious communication on sustainability issues with the public by companies or government. Sustainability communication is a highly complex and even risky activity that needs careful strategic planning and genuine stakeholder input. Research and practice have shown that, if not practiced in a sophisticated and culturally adapted manner, consumers might easily feel misled (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). The "trendsetting module" of the project could be seen as jeopardizing the serious content of sustainability science by summarising and "dumbing down" the messages. Yet, reaching the disinterested masses requires some innovation in communication and conception of policy instruments. The "ecotainment" approach should then be seen as a possible element in a much broader range of policy tools—from price incentives to deliberative participatory processes.

In attempting to address the modern problems of consumerism via the means used by corporations the same problems as identified by Galbraith and Kapp seem to recur. That is marketing and the psychology of advertising aim to manipulate the consumer to a behavioural act i.e. purchase. An approach like that of Project Balance may then be regarded as also sailing close to the wind of manipulation. The fact is that corporate behaviour has been challenged in this respect and needs constant review by social organisations which have the power and authority to challenge them. Repeating a corporate approach that is recognised as problematic is something to avoid. For example, even if forms of "stealth marketing" were deemed effective they appear inadvisable, such as "subliminal messaging" that relies on the forces of the unconscious. The charge of manipulation is substantiated if viewers/consumers are unaware of and fail to realize that they are being marketed to and influenced, or the visibility of the sender/company is hidden. In Project Balance the sender was clearly identified in the opening credits of the TV show, sometimes also in the teasers and moderation, as well as on the website and all other media channels. In addition, the aim was to raise active engagement in the issues and debate in society, not merely push a product purchase.

While from a utilitarian perspective the end may justify the means, from a deontological one there is the need to define clear limits in terms of the ethics of communication. Basically, manipulation profoundly counteracts the ideas of transparency, trust, and authenticity that are fundamental to sustainable consumption and its communication. Indeed the ecological economics literature on sustainability is concerned with making explicit problems of justice and ethical treatment of others as well as exposing the role played by dominant institutions in society in creating the economic and environmental problems we face.

Explicit reference to ethical conduct is clearly necessary in all public policy whether economic cost-benefit analysis conducted behind closed doors or open public engagement. Manipulation is just as feasible in the former (Spash, 2008), as in the latter (Spash, 2007b). Both ecological and Post Keynesian economists aim beyond a focus on a narrow set of mainstream economic instruments of public policy but in doing so need to pay attention to researching their implications. This requires being aware that institutions of public policy are framed within the context of our political economy.

The challenge is therefore to design institutions which achieve the multiple goals desired. Yet within the structures of modern society there will by definition be a struggle for power. If society is to move towards a more sustainable footing which addresses the unsustainable rate of modern material throughput and energy use then the cycle of mass consumerism will need to be addressed. That means finding democratic means of addressing the masses and changing consumption patterns.

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Figure 1.   Overview of Project Balance
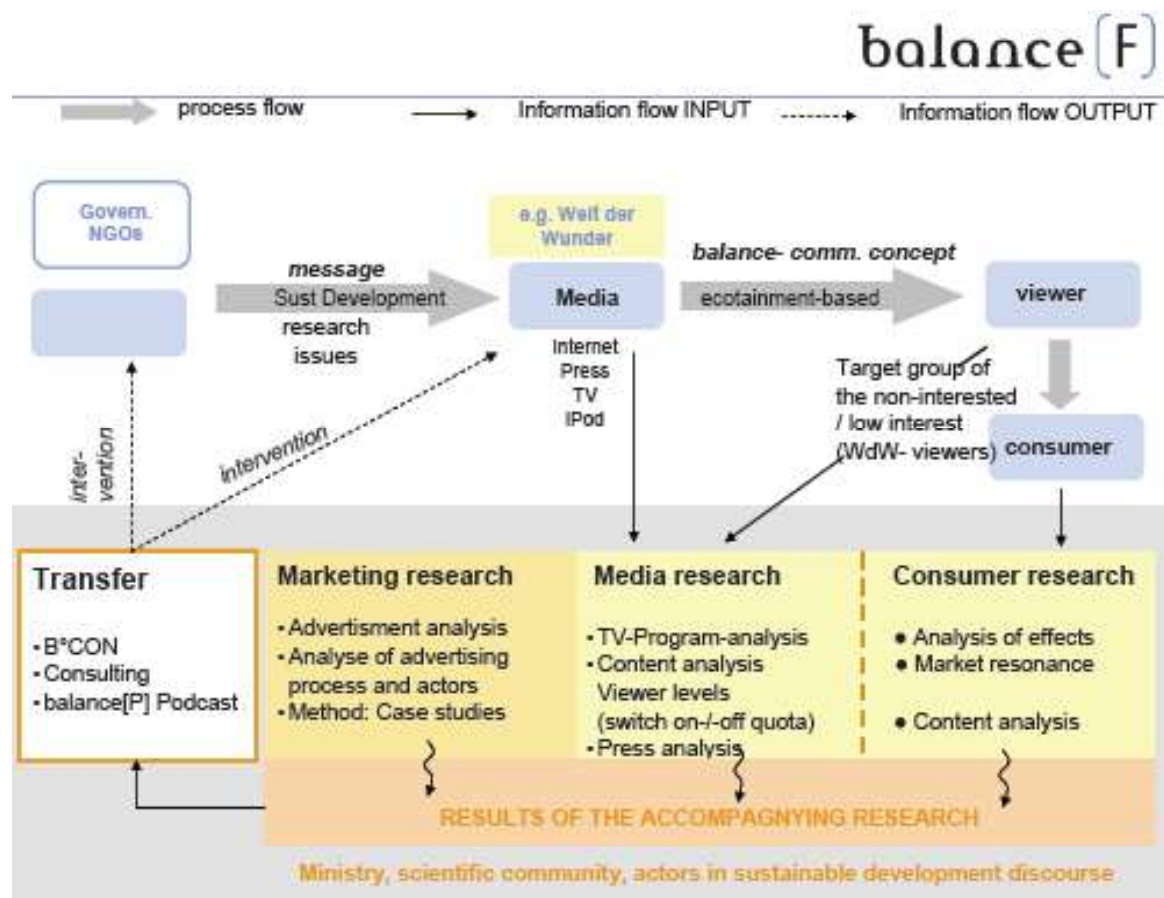
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