

World Wild Fund Malaysia on the World Wide Web: Save Orangutan Campaigns through the Power of Photographs

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to investigate how a website utilized photographs as powerful tools to convey orangutan campaigns and potentially persuade people to take action. A content analysis was employed to analyze World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM) website as it is the only environmental NGOs that advocate “Save Orangutan” online campaigns in Malaysia. The results indicated that WWFM utilised the photographs well for conveying “Save Orangutan” campaigns on its website. With its mission “paving the way towards a future where humans live in harmony with nature”, it also focuses on wild life issues. The photographs have enticed individuals and organizations to form a strong alliance in order to instill awareness among Malaysians in the preservation of Malaysian resources. This study is beneficial for environmental organizations in planning strategies for a more persuasive campaign. Future research should focus on rhetoric elements of photographs and their perpetual potentials.

Keywords: World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM), environmental NGOs (ENGOS), photographs, wildlife campaigns, orangutan, website, World Wide Web (WWW)

1. Introduction

Since the Internet has had an impact on almost all environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in the west from 1990s, a plethora of online campaigns has emerged since then. Cottle (2008) argues that mobilisation constitutes the main goal of the ENGOS by motivating people into advocacy campaigns. Further, campaigns via World Wide Web (WWW) with the powerful photographs enable ENGOS to address the public in a cost efficient way. For example, the grievances about the alarming global environmental issues such as pollution, forestry, climate change, and wild life are advocated through internet or website to unite people locally, regionally, and globally (Nistor, 2010). Scholars argue that websites must represent multicultural traditions to which general public are accustomed such as photographs, identity, logo, color, and language as these elements affect social and communication practices. Belt (2008) and Mungai (2009) agree that the images (photographs) on websites are effective tool to communicate environmental issues to engage activities in environmental campaigns. However, while research on communicating campaigns on line through photographs about environmental issues is growing, the topic remains underexplored. Even though the resources about communication using photographs provide much information for this study, but no research addresses strategy of using photographs to save orangutan. In order to close this gap, this study investigates how World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM) use photographs to communicate “Save Orangutan” campaigns on its site to potentially call people to take action.

1.1 *The Power of Photographs in Online Environmental Campaigns*

The most successful e-campaign proves that the innovative use of the websites can drastically empower NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). The term e-campaigning does not denominate a campaign that is merely run online. Rather the website is the main organising tool which facilitates offline mobilisation and allows to link these two spheres (on- and offline) together (Totz, 2010). Belt (2008) argues that the images (photographs) on websites are effective tool of communication and photographs also can be used to engage activities in

environmental campaigns. The campaigns made available related to popular global issues such as wildlife, forest preservation, nature, global warming, and others. He also suggests that websites must represent multicultural traditions to which general public are accustomed such as photographs, identity, logo, color, and language as these elements affect social and communication practices.

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and beyond, photography was used to enhance public awareness of the need for protecting land and recruiting members to environmental organizations. The powerful use of photography in addition to the written word for conservation dated back to the creation of Yosemite National Park, when photographs persuaded Abraham Lincoln to preserve the beautiful glacier carved landscape for all time (Wikipedia, 2014). The successful use of photographs online has since become a vital tool in a non-profit's online cultivation, and therefore will help non-profits focus on the relationship they are building, increase awareness among supporters and, over time, lead to fundraising campaign success (Cottle, 2008).

There is a growing interest in the social sciences in the power of visual representation to sway both belief and action (Jasanoff, 2001). Recent research suggests that in many instances people learn and retain information that is presented to them visually much better than that which is only provided verbally. Therefore, this supports Hewlett Packard's (2004) idea that visual communication can be more powerful than verbal communication. Obviously, photographs are used for online campaigns to bring the world to the people as they reflect the moments of truth and can be used to raise awareness about the environment. In other studies, Cox (2006), Good (2006), and Andrei (2011) say that online advocacy campaign is a strategic course of action involving communication that potentially call people to take action. They also claim that photographs can also be used to engage actively with the public through competitions and on online portals. This is in agreement with Jasanoff (2001) who highlights that the power of words and images can compel action and it has been a subject for philosophical and political analysis from Plato down to modern times. Since the photography field has matured, Mungai (2009) suggests that it is worthwhile to explore its potential as communication tool in terms of how environmental practitioners and policy makers can campaign visually using photographs. In another study, Durby (2012) argues that any online campaign requires certain basic elements to succeed. He suggested campaigners to provide photos, videos and make hashtags that thoroughly discuss the subject to keep your target audience interested and always engaged. This is in agreement with Petersson (2010) who highlights that pictures, videos and sound files are presented online to encourage political participation because this can enhance a campaign's credibility and even arouse and amplify a person's outrage and dismay.

1.2 "Save Orangutan" Campaigns

Orangutans are what we call an umbrella species, a keystone or flagship species. It means if you protect them you protect the whole host of other biodiversity that depends on the same habitat (King, 2010). King highlights that orangutans are amazingly intelligent animals. They are extremely smart as some of their behaviors are similar to human. Through their keystone status, orangutans are unique. They are not stationary animals as they roam through large forest to collect different kinds of fruits, leaves and insects every day. They are not stationary animals. Each day they roam through large areas of forest collecting different kinds of fruits, insects and bark that they eat and use to build nests in trees. Orangutans need original forests and undeveloped land as their habitat so that they can survive and breed well. That is why protecting them become very essential and relevant because they can be an important representative species for rain forest ecosystem. Originally, orangutans, the largest animals to live in trees can be found in Asia, southern China, foothills of the Himalayas and south to the island of Java, Indonesia. However, due to massive of habitat destruction, they could be extinct in the wild and can only be found in Sumatra and Borneo (King, 2014). Known as "man of the forest" in the Malay language, orangutans move by swinging from one branch to another and from one tree to another. They love to eat fruits. In fact they cannot survive without fruits. While eating the fruits, they disperse the seeds all over in the forest, and therefore they help the fruit trees to flourish and keep the diversity of rainforest woody plants at the same time. Orangutans also like to eat young leaves, but leaves are not their favorite or main food source. Therefore they cannot survive in places without sufficient fruits. They sleep in nests on the trees and hardly descend to the forest floor. They clump together leafy branches with the leaves to comfortably stay and sleep in it. However, despite their dependence on trees, the situation for orangutans in Sabah's forests is alarming. This is due to the ongoing unsustainable forest management practices whereby the forests are being degraded very badly (World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM), 2014).

In relation to the above issue, Meijaard and Wich (2007) highlight that orangutans are threatened due to conversion of lowland forests for other crops or oil palm, whereby they cannot survive in such situation. Due to that, WWFM takes initiative to rehabilitate the forests of the North Ulu Segama (NUS) Sabah, which has been badly degraded to make a better home for 300 orangutans. "Save Orangutan" campaigns are communicated

continuously by WWFM on its website in order to stop deforestation and ensure that the orangutans can continue to survive in their natural habitat. WWFM continues working on the campaigns to make sure men do not destroy forest by logging, develop land unnecessarily, and convert forest to oil palm plantations and other crops so that wildlife species, especially orangutan can survive, breed well, and live longer. Orangutans are species whose very existence in an ecosystem greatly affects the health of other species and the ecosystem at large. Therefore, when the numbers of keystone species like orangutans decline, it means the survival and abundance of many other species in the ecosystem also decline and are negatively impacted. On the same note, Sowards (2006) argues that environmental groups attempt to establish that orangutans are unique above all other animals by privileging their keystone status and connecting them to humans. In relation to that, WWFM's effort to protect orangutans is vital to the overall health of the lowland forest ecosystem in which they thrive as the vitality of the orangutan population will only flourish if their forest home is kept undisturbed and intact.

2. Method

In this study, we analyzed World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM) website and focused on photographs it provided in communicating "Save Orangutan" campaigns. Established as a national conservation trust on 13 January 1972, WWFM was purposively chosen as case for this study because out of twenty four environmental NGOs in Malaysia (Malaysia Environmental NGOs (MENGO), 2014), it was the only environmental NGOs that advocated "Save Orangutan" campaigns on website in Malaysia. With its mission "paving the way towards a future where humans live in harmony with nature", it also focused on wild life issues, scientific research of wildlife and important natural habitats and works with local communities to improve livelihoods and protect the environment.

A content analysis of the ENGOMs websites was conducted from 10th to 15th November 2014 in an attempt to address these issues. We coded one of the important categories of websites that is 'usefulness of information' as suggested by Abdullah (2013), Aida Nasirah and Jusang (2014), Aida Nasirah et al. (2014), Bauer and Scharl (2000), and Coupland (2005) that photographs and logos are very useful tools in environmental websites and also very useful information to the media, volunteers, and public. We also coded the placement of photographs as units of analysis until the fourth level (Level 0-Level 3) as fourth level of the website content was the maximum level considered for analysis as the sites broke into sub-sites and began to show a loss of their institutional uniformity beyond that (Abdullah, 2013). Morville and Rosenfeld (2002), Brinck et al. (2001), and Ha and James (1998) also suggest that a 3-5 level hierarchy is the best practice and maximum depth that users are willing to trace. We later coded 'photographs that provided means for people to take action' as one of the inventory under 'usefulness of information' category (Aida Nasirah et al., 2014) to answer the research question: How does World Wild Fund Malaysia (WWFM) use photographs to communicate "Save Orangutan" campaigns online?

3. Results and Discussion

The web content analysis demonstrates that all the three ENGOMs had relatively small websites, providing photographs in communicating environmental campaigns that potentially mobilise support and action. The result in Table 1 below shows that WWFM had embedded the total of twelve photographs that provided means for people to take action across its website in communicating the "Save Orangutan" campaigns. The result indicated that WWFM had well utilised the photographs for its online campaigns.

Table 1. Photographs available on WWFM website on "Save Orangutan" campaigns that potentially mobilize action

"Save Orangutan" Campaigns	WWFM
Total of photographs on "Save Orangutan" Campaigns that potentially mobilize action	12

As shown in Table 1 above, 12 photographs were used to communicate "Save Orangutan" campaigns quite effectively on WWFM's website. This indicates WWFM is committed to protecting orangutans. The photographs were embedded to inhabit our consciousness towards the wildlife, nature, and the environment. Photographs embedded in the "Save Orangutan" campaigns on WWFM site documented social ill in order to bring about social change. As argued by Lester (2006) and Mungai (2009), photographs that that communicate nature can contribute to finding solutions to some of the world's most pressing environmental concerns. The

purpose of the embedded photographs with the related “Save Orangutan” campaigns was to bring attention to these problems and hopefully bring about a change to these conditions at the social level and potentially call people to take action. This is in agreement with Jasanoff (2001), Belt (2008), Cottle (2008), Mungai (2009), and Durby (2012), who said that ENGOs also used the power of photographs in their online campaigns for communication and information collation on the activities they carried out. In this study, we argued that WWFM has crafted a great impact through the campaigns and the photographs on the endangered status of orangutans to potentially call people to take action to save orangutans. In one way or other, through the power of photographs provided on its site, WWFM has communicated the uniqueness of orangutans and their rain forest habitat. Through those photographs, WWFM attempted to prove that orangutans are so unique and extraordinary that they should be saved in order to ensure other species in the ecosystem remains safe. The photographs provided on WWFM’s site, communicated that unplanned and large amount of deforestation will result in the loss of these unique species such as orangutans and their habitats.

Overall, it was reflected that the photographs provided on WWFM’s site have certainly communicated that orangutans have been affected by the natural conditions of the forests altered by human beings. As argued by Sowards (2006) and King (2010), the effects of anthropomorphism through the power of photographs provided on WWFM’s site have therefore, established the uniqueness of orangutans as those photographs had successfully created the perpetual potential through the images etched into the minds of the audiences.

4. Conclusion

“Seeing is believing.” It has been that way from the beginning, long before Messrs (Mungai, 2009). An innovative photography has a great environmental story to tell. It is an informative and engaging visual communication product telling stories about nature and the environment. As argued by Lester (2006), photographs that that communicate nature can contribute to finding solutions to some of the world's most pressing environmental concerns. The result of this study reflects that WWFM has used its website to communicate environmental campaigns that potentially mobilize people to take action. This is in agreement with Keck and Sikkink (2004) who argue that there is strong evidence on the connection between the use of websites and online campaigning among ENGOs. The findings also support Cox (2006), Good (2006), and Özdemir (2012) who argue that online advocacy campaigning is a strategic course of action involving communication that trigger the desired response whereby the ENGOs often mobilise people to take action.

As suggested by Jasanoff (2001), Belt (2008), Cottle (2008), Mungai (2009), and Durby (2012), WWFM also used the power of photographs in their online campaigns for communication and information collation on the activities that they carried out. The photographs embedded in its online “Save Orangutan” campaigns has constructed identities and invested them with “believability” about the orangutan issues in particular and environment issues in general. In the case of “Save Orangutan” campaigns communicated by WWFM on its site, it could be felt that once we, as audience saw the photographs of orangutan in various expressions as provided, the touching feelings came through and remained forever in our hearts and this had potentially called us to take action. This is so true that nature of photography is very powerful, meaningful and impressive as argued by Sowards (2006). Soward claims that in communicating environment, nature photography which is so beautiful and powerful should be utilized fully. The photographs of orangutans provided by WWFM also managed to provoke people to debate, support the organization to solve the issues, and finally get involved in the campaigns. By communicating the photographs in such a way, to some extent, WWFM has potentially mobilised individuals and organizations into a strong alliance assure the preservation of Malaysian resources.

It can be concluded that WWFM has promoted orangutan awareness through the photographs provided on its online campaigns. It is also believed that as an environmental organization, WWFM continues to find ways to save orangutans and make them more unique and relevant to the planet. By communicating “Save Orangutan” campaigns through the power of photographs on its site, WWFM can help to protect orangutans and their habitat as powerful photographs can potentially help audience to predict the feelings and the true picture of orangutans as argued by Meijaard and Wich (2007).

This study opens up a new gap in literature. It is essential for other researchers to conduct study on the rhetoric elements of photographs in future as this may develop the possibilities for discovering the unknown through appeals and the power of photographs in environmental communication.

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