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Objective or Opinionated: How the Media Are Shaping the Sustainability Debate

Breakout Session Summary
Friday, November 5, 2010 | 10:30-11:30 a.m.

Speakers

- » **Brian Dumaine**, Senior Editor at Large, *Fortune*
- » **Todd Woody**, Editor, *Sustainable Industries*
- » **Amon Rappaport**, Communications Director, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » The media landscape is changing with the decline of newspapers and the rise of blogs. While this has made it easier to get sustainability issues covered, the depth of analysis has declined and it's harder to correct inaccuracies or smears in the press.
- » Reporting that gives equal balance to opposing sides of an issue such as climate change, even when the science clearly points to global warming, is harming the competitiveness of the United States. The rest of the world has accepted climate change and is investing heavily in green technology, particularly in China.
- » The speakers agreed that if there is a genuine dispute, a journalist should represent both sides of the issue. But their coverage should be based on reporting and analysis, and it should include conclusions and a point of view whenever appropriate for the publication.

Memorable Quotes

"There's a perception that you have to present a fair and balanced point of view in the media. Some journalists have taken that to mean if 90 percent of the world's climate scientists are saying our ecosystem is warming and 10 percent have doubts, then they get equal play." —Brian Dumaine, *Fortune*

"The bar has gotten very high [on sustainability reporting in the media] because a lot of companies are doing great things. What I look for is what's new, what's different, and does the story say something larger about the company's strategy." —Todd Woody, *Sustainable Industries*

Overview

After introducing himself and the panelists, Rappaport asked a few questions of the audience to help frame the discussion: "What is your perception of coverage of sustainability and of your companies in the press? Are the media covering the right topics? And are they being fair or not in their approach to reporting?" Audience members responded by raising a few issues:

- » There is a false equivalent presented in terms of needing to report two sides on climate change.
- » Reporting on the food industry is often skewed; for example, reports often assume that organic food is always better than conventional food.



- » The press tends to report on disasters, whereas companies tend to be more incremental in their approach to sustainability.

Dumaine then made his opening remarks by focusing on the perception that the media has to present a fair and balanced point of view on climate change even though data overwhelmingly shows that our ecosystem is warming. According to Dumaine, this is particularly problematic in the United States, and it is hurting the country's competitiveness. The rest of the world has accepted climate change and is investing in green technology, particularly in China, which has become the largest manufacturer of wind turbines and electric cars in the world.

Part of the problem, according to Dumaine, is that the debate is linked to a political agenda. For example, Rupert Murdoch believes in climate change and is trying to make News Corporation as sustainable as possible, yet the money is in the ratings and it is easy to appeal to the conservative population of the United States and say that climate change is a hoax.

In his opening remarks, Woody observed that the media industry is not sustainable and this is having large implications on how sustainability stories are being covered and by whom. News organizations are shrinking and are thus staffed with young, inexperienced reporters challenged to post five stories a day. At the same time, there is a rise in the number of blogs and other forms of "news" that are being created without any traditional reporting. So while more sustainability issues are being covered, the stories don't go as deep in their exploration.

The conversation then shifted to a discussion on the credo of objectivity. Woody said that if there is a genuine dispute, a journalist should represent both sides of the issue, but their coverage should be based on reporting and analysis. Dumaine agreed, adding that analytical journalism should lead to conclusions and a point of view. As part of the analysis, journalists have to consider and present opposing views too, which serves to strengthen the primary argument.

During the question and answer period, Dumaine and Woody were asked to comment on whether people were more interested in stories about the economy or the environment. Dumaine said that people are more interested in the economy, but that the press has to do a better job of showing the link between the environment and job creation. Woody went further and said that the recent U.S. elections showed that people in California, the world's 10th largest economy, were interested in both the economy and the environment.

Next, Woody and Dumaine addressed sustainable consumption and sustainable product design. Woody said that consumption has largely been ignored in media coverage of sustainability, and Dumaine added that in the future there will be greater emphasis on sustainable product design. The media will have to focus on those companies that are designing products that are sustainable for the future.

Responding to a suggestion from a member of the audience that there is a political agenda in the media against certain industries, such as extractives, Dumaine said that there is misinformation from both sides. For example, in the United States, there are several commercials for clean coal, even though no such thing exists. This misinformation has created a lot of misunderstanding. The more honest companies are about their practices, the more mutual trust there will be.

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