



MEDIA AND THE NONPROFIT WORLD

A Case-Study on WWF- Malaysia's Use of Media Tools to Champion Advocacy

Anita Devasahayam



Source: WWF-Malaysia

As issues and campaigns for various causes in the non-profit space have begun to proliferate across Asia, the struggle to remain relevant and gain critical attention is growing. Author Anita Devasahayam discusses how the Malaysian chapter of the World Wide Fund for Nature tackled the challenge by devising new media strategies and advocacy campaigns to remain relevant in an increasingly connected and cause-conscious world.



Anita Devasahayam

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly media-saturated world, non-profits operating on tight resources struggle with the same challenges as their for-profit counterparts – namely, the struggle to gain attention for the work they do. As a result, many nonprofits rely on creative partnerships to gain mileage and support for their initiatives. Examples include partnerships between multinational companies such as HSBC and its eco-partnership program, Maxis Communications with its Cyberkids community camp or Royal Dutch Shell and its climate change agenda.

In communicating information, the media has shaped opinions, transformed societies and driven democracies by its ability to reach the general public. As Kitzinger pointed out “the relationship between people and the media is more subtle than often assumed.”¹ The Internet has allowed for the public to participate, collaborate and interact with newsmakers and news providers in a way that was not viable with more traditional forms of media. Characterised by Aeron Davis as “outsider” and “resource-poor” groups, nonprofits face additional challenges in an unfavourable communications environment.² Not only do the resource-poor rarely receive media coverage, the issues typically championed by nonprofits may not be seen as significant by the general public. Nonprofits also have to contend with the issue of credibility. On one hand, they do not have the resources to tap on large communication networks. On the other, advocacy efforts may require its proponents to challenge information available in mainstream media and to question positions being propagated by government. This may result in the dissemination of messages that are seen to have lesser credibility by the public, which affects the kind and amount of support received.³

However, there are nonprofits that have been successful in their communications and media strategies. Dimitrov posits that these nonprofits were able to successfully build “media capital” – a concept coined by Aeron Davis to refer to “an organisation’s reputation, legitimacy and authority which are linked to its credibility, reliability and productivity as a news source.”⁴ Other scholars have subsequently renamed this “Communication Capital”⁵ to reflect an approach that encompasses not only traditional media but also in-house and direct publicity. These experts point out that only strategic,

long-term communication may accumulate such symbolic capital which then secures easy access to the media and favourable publicity.

Nonprofits, like for-profit commercial entities, are able to utilise any media channel that best suits their publicity needs. Although recent attention has been paid to online and social media, traditional media is still a relevant player. As an example of astute utilisation of the full range of media options, the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota, whose objective is to increase awareness of health matters and become a catalyst for change, implemented a media strategy to reframe the “health story.” The videos made by the Foundation to support this were distributed in DVDs, selected community screenings, TV channels, social media tools like Youtube, their websites, and websites of affiliates and supporters.

This article looks at the case-study of World Wide Fund for Nature-Malaysia, which like other nonprofits and advocacy groups must contend with issues of relevance, credibility and strategic use of media to deliver its conservation message.

WWF-MALAYSIA: BACKGROUND

One of the most established nonprofits in Malaysia is the World Wide Fund for Nature-Malaysia. Founded in 1961 in Morges, Switzerland, WWF today has operations in over 100 countries. This international conservation organisation also has over five million supporters worldwide who contribute in cash, in kind or with time towards its activities.

According to WWF’s website, its core mission is “to stop the degradation of the planet’s natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by:

1. conserving the world’s biological diversity;
2. ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable and
3. promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.”⁶

Established on 13 January 1972, WWF-Malaysia (WWF-M) grew from a two-man operation to over a 100-strong organisation stretching from Kelantan to Sabah. As the organisation grew, the scope of its work was broadened beyond its initial focus on

scientific research on wildlife to include management of protected areas, environmental education, public awareness, advocacy campaigns and policy work. The Malaysia chapter currently runs over 70 projects ranging from saving endangered tiger and turtle species, to protecting the highland forests, rivers and seas. The projects are funded through a combination of grants, donations, sponsorships and fund-raisers.⁷

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS AND IMPACTFUL PROJECTS

Its illustrious history in Malaysia and the success of its work worldwide ensured that WWF-M continued to receive support from both the larger public and multinational corporations to fund its activities. WWF-M also has some long-term patrons, including the Duke of Edinburgh HRH Prince Phillip and Perak state monarch HRH Sultan Azlan Shah who are reliable supporters of its initiatives. Some significant projects that brought in key corporate sponsors in Malaysia included the reforestation initiative in the Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah with Boh Plantations Sdn Bhd; saving the Sumatran rhinoceros with Honda Malaysian Sdn Bhd; improving quality of life of interior communities with HSBC Bank (M) Bhd and a sustainable development programme with womenfolk of Setiu with Nestle Malaysia.

Although WWF-M had the support of big brand names, there were concerns that the projects did not receive sufficient media coverage and were not reaching the desired audience – namely, the larger public interested in the environment and ecology.

According to its 2009 annual report, corporate sponsors contributed over RM1.91 million in 2009 compared to RM2.15 million in 2008 in financial support to WWF-M, a drop of almost 11 per cent from 2008 to 2009. Conversely, donations from individuals over the same time period rose by 16 percent. Donations from individuals accounted for 38 per cent of the organisation's total revenue. Recognising that a shift had occurred in its source of funding and support and more was needed to engage individual donors from among the Malaysian public, WWF-M was prompted to review their media strategies to meet this objective.

MEDIA AND WWF-MALAYSIA: MATCHING AGENDAS?

Mainstream media has played a significant role in spreading news pertaining to WWF-M's activities, achievements and calls for support. However, twice as many articles were written in the media from

2000-2004, as compared to 2005-2009, though there was an overall increase in the number of conservation issues in the latter period.

One contributing factor to this change is the general increase in access to the Internet across Malaysia over the last decade. New platforms such as text messages, podcasts and online news clips have emerged to complement traditional print and broadcast media. Readers are more discerning and have greater choice in terms of how they access news and information. WWF-M recognised that it would have to work with these newer media channels, while at the same time coming up with innovative strategies to engage traditional media platforms, to ensure their message reaches the larger public.

To determine what was lacking in the organisation's existing methods to engage with mainstream media, WWF-M conducted a survey targeting senior journalists and editors at local newspapers and broadcast stations.⁸ The survey results were eye opening and gave WWF-M an impetus to change the way they pushed their agenda via the media.

The survey identified three key areas that WWF-M needed to address in order to advocate their message of conservation, strengthen their relationship with their current stakeholders and cultivate the larger public in this media saturated environment. The three key areas are: (a) simplify the message; (b) cultivate media relationships; (c) ensure that their voice is heard despite the unfavourable media environment.

1. Simplify the Message: Give Me Something Fresh & Easy to Understand

Survey participants stated that stories tackling dwindling numbers of leatherback turtles or threatened forest fauna due to intense logging were "typical and usual", "old" or "recycled."⁹

In other words, what was perceived as urgent or significant news by WWF-M was not viewed as news by the media. WWF-M's press releases also tended to be technically complex, with little or no effort to craft the issues in a manner that would be understood by lay persons. Furthermore, the alarmist tone that often characterised the press releases issued by the organisation did little to increase its credibility, even among reporters who were conversant with conservation issues. Some reporters characterised WWF-M press releases as hyperbolic and occasionally inaccurate.¹⁰

Fig 1: A comparison between original press release and actual published article.

Excerpt from original press release:	Excerpt of published article:
<p>Pollution in the Mekong River has pushed the local population of Irrawaddy dolphins to the brink of extinction, a new report by WWF has revealed.</p> <p>The Mekong River Irrawaddy dolphin (<i>Orcaella brevirostris</i>) population inhabits a 190km stretch of the Mekong River between Cambodia and Lao PDR. Since 2003, the population has suffered 88 deaths of which over 60 percent were calves under two weeks old. The latest population is estimated between 64 and 76 members.</p> <p>“Necropsy analysis identified a bacterial disease as the cause of the calf deaths. This disease would not be fatal unless the dolphin’s immune systems were suppressed, as they were in these cases, by environmental contaminants,” said Dr Verné Dove, report author and veterinarian with WWF Cambodia.</p> <p>Researchers found toxic levels of pesticides such as DDT and environmental contaminants such as PCBs during analysis of the dead dolphin calves. These pollutants may also pose a health risk to human populations living along the Mekong that consume the same fish and water as the dolphins.</p> <p><i>(Source: WWF press release titled Mekong dolphins on the brink of extinction issued on 18 June 2009)</i></p>	<p>PHNOM PENH (Reuters Life!) - Toxic waste in the Mekong River is a factor pushing an endangered dolphin species to extinction, the WWF warned on Thursday, estimating there were less than 80 left in a stretch of water between Cambodia and Laos.</p> <p><i>(Source: Published article titled Polluted water endangers Mekong dolphins: WWF, Thursday 18 June, 2009 2:22pm IST, Thomson Reuters, 2009).</i></p> <p><i>Emphasis Added</i></p>

2. Cultivate Media Relationships: Give Me Someone to Talk To

Secondly, the media stated that it had trouble keeping up with changes in the WWF-M’s communications team. After over a decade of dealing with a key contact person, the media had to establish contacts with new members in the WWF-M team. Meanwhile, the communications team of the WWF-M also failed to engage with the media on the presumption that the strength of their brand was sufficient to draw attention to the various causes. Mainstream media members generally felt the onus lay with WWF-M to keep editors and journalists apprised of internal changes and new developments.

3. Ensuring Their Voice is Heard: Speaking Up Over the Noise

WWF-M was also affected by the economic downturn in the 2008-2009 period. Appeals for donations in the public domain became particularly challenging as a result. WWF-M’s appeals for coverage in broadcast media also revealed that the industry has shifted its emphasis to focus more on poverty, disabilities and unmet social needs. With limited air-time available, conservation and environmental issues were given less coverage through such media platforms. WWF-M needed to work harder to make their issues relevant, timely, and just as important (if not more) than other matters the media was covering.

STEPPING UP TO THE MEDIA CHALLENGE

In response to these challenges, WWF-M's communications team launched an integrated media and marketing campaign that involved media engagement together with marketing and promotional activities. The first example was Earth Hour 2009, another was the "Egg=Life" turtle conservation campaign. Each respective campaign was publicised both in the media and bolstered through integrated promotional tactics. Prior to this, the communications team did not supplement publicity with supporting activities nor did they adopt tactical approaches such as Facebook to reach a larger audience. In these two campaigns, WWF-M made use of social media to promote both campaigns in the virtual world, and set up booths and roadshows in various city malls throughout Malaysia to obtain pledge signatures. These activities generated awareness among larger public venues and more people pledged their support to these campaigns. WWF-M was able to secure 75,000 signatures for Earth Hour 2009, and 100,000 signatures for "Egg=Life." The results clearly show that running promotional activities such as signature campaigns at city malls as well as Facebook parallel to media publicity reached an audience that was fragmented across the real and virtual worlds. The Communications Team also acknowledged that donations from individuals had increased with the integrated publicity and

promotion compared to years when there were no supporting activities to complement the media publicity.

WWF-M's TX2 tiger conservation campaign that kicked off in February 2010 was another opportunity to pilot some of their new approaches. The launch, aiming to halt the dwindling tiger population (currently at 3,200 worldwide) over a 12-year period, was kicked off with pre-event publicity in print, broadcast and online media that highlighted, games, family entertainment, spreading the message and a great day filled with fun and education. Its coincidence with the Lunar New Year of the Tiger also elevated the meaning of tiger conservation, which WWF-M further expounded by providing tiger-themed activities like "tiger-face" painting, educational boards about tigers worldwide, and tiger-themed freebies as souvenirs. This proactive form of outreach across multiple media channels, received a very positive response. In addition to over 100 volunteers stepping up to help, crowds travelled over 100km from the city centre to the event location and provided further publicity opportunities for this campaign. Between pre-event publicity and post-event media follow-up, the "Tx2" campaign amounted to RM1.2 million in advertising (dollar) value.¹¹ Malaysian public relations practitioners would quantify that sum by at least three times to value at RM3.6 million.¹²

Fig 2: WWF press release titled 1000 faces for 1000 tigers issued on 20th February 2010.¹³

The screenshot shows the WWF Malaysia website interface. At the top left is the WWF logo with the tagline "for a living planet". A search bar is located in the top right. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for Home, About WWF-Malaysia, Media & Information, How You Can Help, and FAQ. A sidebar on the left lists various newsroom categories. The main content area features a large headline "1000 faces for 1000 tigers" and a sub-headline "Posted on 22 February 2010". The text of the press release describes the launch of the TX2 campaign in Selangor, mentioning the sighting of 1000 tigers and the goal of doubling the population by 2022. It includes a quote from Dato' Dr Dionysius Sharma and a photograph of two children with tiger face paint holding signs with the numbers 999 and 1000.

UPDATE AND UPGRADE MEDIA CONTENT

The communications team has also changed the way stories are pitched. They identified newsworthy angles, removed technical jargon and humanised stories for each target media. Simple news basics such as ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ (or what is known in journalism as 5Ws and 1H) became part of WWF-M’s thought process in developing relevant pitches and press releases for the media. The team was also aware that the agenda for environment and ecology is wide, so they focused on current and pertinent issues that can be more visible compared to other items clamouring for media attention, yet at the same time can be piggybacked on a global conservation agenda.

Looking to a New Audience

Conservation issues were previously thought to be the domain of well educated and affluent Malaysians (i.e. English media readership) and the communications team, traditionally operating in an English-speaking environment, sought the English media to champion their agenda. Furthermore, advertisers operated under the presumption that the spending power was with the English reading population, evidenced by almost 50 per cent of the total advertising expenditure targeted at the English media. However, the Audit Bureau of Circulation and Nielsen Media Research found for the period July 2008 to June 2009, the combined average daily circulation of Chinese and Malay newspapers was at 70 per cent of the Malaysian readership, as compared to 30 per cent for English newspapers, even though the non-English media received less advertising dollars. This prompted WWF-M to step up their engagement of the non-English media, consistent with its principle that conservation concerned everyone and they were missing a large constituent in Malaysia by ignoring the non-English media. The team set up face-to-face meetings with the editors of these publications to find out what would appeal to their readers and how WWF-M could serve that need. The strategy has led to greater coverage of conservation issues in the Chinese and Malay media.

Further Reading

Audit Bureau of Circulation Malaysia, 2009, <http://www.abcm.org.my/>

Using Social Media

The WWF-M only began tapping on social media networks from April 2009, a late start in its recognition of the value of social media to reach out to the young to support their conservation cause. Its appeal quickly grew as they found it easier to recruit volunteers for its youth outreach efforts via social networks. Currently, WWF-M’s Facebook page has 14,000 fans and an online appeal for its Tx2 Tiger campaign provided better results compared to traditional appeals used in the past to recruit volunteers.¹⁴ This propelled WWF-M to embrace social media and update the content on its website with more youth-focused content. The WWF-M website now incorporates Facebook, Twitter and Youtube to reach out to a broader and more Internet-literate audience in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

WWF-M’s conservation advocacy agenda needed to connect with the larger public domain. To reach out to individuals beyond their traditional patrons and corporate sponsors, they needed to use all media channels available – mobile, print, online or broadcast – to achieve this objective. Not only do all channels need to be utilised, WWF-M had to refine its approach to cultivate media relationships and upgrade media content, such that its conservation message will have relevance and credibility with the public. It has demonstrated that advocacy through engagement, not scare tactics, is more likely to resonate with the public. Although WWF-M’s new strategies are in their early stages of implementation, it has gained success by combining traditional media relations practices, with social media platforms. This has served to demonstrate that the public can be, and is, receptive to environmental advocacy, if such work is carried out in an engaging manner. The key to long-term engagement success is for conservation advocates to constantly re-evaluate and reposition their media outreach strategies, particularly at a time when funding is scarce and multiple causes compete for an audience’s attention – leading to stronger impact in the long-term.

¹ Jenny Kitzinger, “The Role of Media in Public Engagement,” *Engaging Science: Thoughts, Deeds, Analysis, Action*, (2006): 44 – 48 http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/stellent/groups/corporatesite/@msh_publishing_group/documents/web_document/wtx032695.pdf.

² Aeron Davis, “*Public Relations Democracy: Public Relations, Politics and the Mass Media in Britain*,” (Manchester University Press, 2002) <http://preview.tinyurl.com/publicrelationsdemocracy> and Roumen Dimitrov, “*Acting Strategically: Skilled Communication by Australian Refugee Advocacy Groups*”, *Global Media Journal (Australian Edition)*, Issue 2, 2008. <http://preview.tinyurl.com/actingstrategically>.

³ Roumen Dimitrov, “*Acting Strategically: Skilled Communication by Australian Refugee Advocacy Groups*”, *Global Media Journal (Australian Edition)*, Issue 2, 2008. <http://preview.tinyurl.com/actingstrategically>.

- ⁴ see note 2 above.
- ⁵ see note 2 above.
- ⁶ WWF-Malaysia and its environmental conservation work, http://wwf.org.my/about_wwf/.
- ⁷ WWF-Malaysia Annual Review 2009, http://www.wwf.org.my/media_and_information/publications_main/?9880/WWF-Annual-Review-2009.
- ⁸ The author conducted a media audit among editors and senior journalists from leading publications such as Star Publications (M) Bhd, The New Straits Times Press Group, Utusan Group and Media Chinese International Group between June and July 2009 to ascertain perception of WWF-M among the media.
- ⁹ Comments are direct quotes resulting from media audit.
- ¹⁰ WWF, "Mekong Dolphins on the Brink of Extinction," media release, 18 June 2009. Subsequent published article: Polluted water endangers Mekong dolphins: WWF. *Thomson Reuters*, Jun 18, 2009.
- ¹¹ Advertising value is a "measure of economic value of space and time covered by print or broadcast media, had these media contents been purchased at advertising rates." Chang Peng Kee and Musa Abu Hassan, "The advertising-value equivalent (AVE) method in quantifying economic values of public relations activities: Experience of a public listed company in Malaysia", *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 & 2, 2006.
- ¹² Chang Peng Kee and Musa Abu Hassan, "The advertising-value equivalent (AVE) method in quantifying economic values of public relations activities: Experience of a public listed company in Malaysia", *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1 & 2, 2006 <http://www.usm.my/km/24-06/KM%20ART%203.pdf>.
- ¹³ WWF-Malaysia, 1000 faces for 1000 tigers, http://wwf.org.my/media_and_information/newsroom_main/press_releases/?10400/1000-faces-for-1000-tigers.
- ¹⁴ Two-thirds of the 100 face painters and volunteers signed up through social networks such as Facebook, instant messenger, mailing lists and email. WWF began recruiting volunteers a month before the event.