

OECD Workshop: EST! Communicating environmentally sustainable transport.

Contribution to session 5 by Michael Houben, Cologne, Freelance TV-Journalist, working for WDR/ARD

Changing the world with the media ?

I am journalist, not a scientist - so what can I possibly tell? I started working for TV in the mid-eighties. From the beginning I focused on ecology colliding with economy. Back then, these topics were new. Just remember 'Ozone-depletion'. I produced a 45-minute documentary about a group of scientists, including Paul Crutzen, doing basic stratospheric research in northern Sweden. At this time there was no private TV in Germany, Just three public owned channels to choose from. More then ten Million people watched this film. A lot of other films followed, many Journalists were doing similar things, the political debate grew more intense - and after some years the CFCs had been banned. It seemed so easy to change the world! Just tell the people what scientists found out, start a public debate - and people (including politicians) will do the right thing. I was young then. Reality pretty soon got me back from dreaming.

It's not the purpose of journalism to change the world, but when reporting about people who are trying to do it - and the facts are showing that they have a good reason to do so, it sometimes is part of the job.

And it's easy to change the world when you face nothing but a fraction of the chemical industry, and some producers of hairspray or cooling technology. To make it even easier there was a practical alternative for almost every application at hand, nobody had to change habits - and still it was hard enough.

In 1987 I did my first film about climate change, including strategies to slow it down. 'More efficient production and use of less fossil energy' is the best summary I did know then and do know now. But the problem with climate change is more complex than ozone depletion. The EST-Program is one of a multitude of Programs trying to solve it. If you look into the archives of mass media, you will find thousands of articles and films on related topics - but still very slow progress in achieving substantial success. You know your 'business as usual scenarios' better than I do.

But back to the eighties and German TV: Of course we had a kind of professional pride to present a 'nice' film. But when private TV came up and people had a huge variety of channels and programs to choose from, we learned that most of the people did not want to see and hear what we had to show and tell. To put it simple: Who wants to hear that driving is a bad thing, when you have the choice to see Michael Schuhmacher win a race on the other channel ... or switch over to see action Heroes driving a car while saving the world? (Have you ever seen one riding a bike?) Heroes are important - we will meet them again on the next pages.. Today more then 25 channels are waiting for audience. It's hard work even to reach a million people at a time.

Telling stories few people want to hear!

When only a stable group of three or four percent 'marketshare' is watching an ecology orientated program you can be pretty sure that this group is mostly well educated, already knows most of the problems and already has seen and heard a lot of strategies to solve them. Most of them will follow you even if you start to discuss details. But after a while you end up in a kind of 'incest' - definitely not a practical way to change the world! Some years ago our rating was down to 4 Percent.. But to prove the necessity of the public money we spend, the prime-time programs should have at least 6.5 percent. They gave us a year to reach this goal. Besides: the program I am talking about was - and is - the one and only remaining show of it's kind within the complete range of German prime-time TV. The editor and her team are working hard to keep it there. Last year our market-share was above 7 Percent. Maybe some of the recipes we used may help you to achieve your goal. Let's look at what we did - and what tools we used.

How to know what the audience likes ?

The most important tool we have is a so called 'minute-curve' showing how many people are watching each minute of our show. You will find some 'switching points' in there. When prominent programs are ending on other channels plenty of viewers are floating around. Some will switch to our program, some will stay, as long as they are interested. But quite often you find a whole lot of people switching away just in the middle of the show. Looking at the curves next day sometimes gives hints, why they did so: Maybe it was an explanation that went too deep into detail or something being hard to understand. Or perhaps an interview-partner who had important things to tell but who told it in a complicated or even boring way. But you don't always see simple reasons like this. You are sure you have made everything right. But still the audience has been switching away. We looked at a high number of curves like this, consulted media psychologists and even a real Hollywood-script-doctor.

Basic findings

When you tell the audience about a problem, but don't give at least a clue towards a possible solution, people get frustrated. That's not a pleasant way to spend an evening. Of course: bad news do sell. But mostly it is the smell of 'blood, sweat and tears' which is attracting people. And there is more than enough of it within the daily news. When you try to sell background information bad news is simply bad news, added to all the problems people have anyway, stealing their precious free time. People don't want to get frustrated. The authors in Hollywood know this and this is why they favour happy endings..

The easiest way to get people watching science and ecology-related programs is to leave out any serious problem and politics. Wildlife will always find its audience - as do science-related shows which concentrate on explaining the world as it is, as simply as possible. „Look how fascinating ! We will show you how it works“ If you do this with an easy-listening manner people will look, learn and have fun. That is something to start with.

But it is getting more complicated as soon as you want to explain 'what does it mean' or even start presenting ideas how the world 'must be changed to be saved'. Even this may be possible, as long as others have to act. 'The industry', 'the government', But nobody wants to be told that he has to change his beloved habits. Worst case is preaching sufficiency. „Hey you! You can save the climate! Just use less gasoline! - And stop spending two holidays a year in distant locations!“ If you look at the minute-curve of such a TV feature you would see most of the audience run away. Ironically the same line would work fine within a dialogue between two action heroes. Best placed in the middle of a car chase when one of the heroes is driving the car while the other one prepares to jump into the landing-gear of a starting aeroplane to catch the bad guys.

Wrap a 'nice' package.

But sometimes you have to 'sell' bad news like this without having action heroes at hand. Having good pictures, smoothly edited, is basic craftsmanship. Alas, as long as the budgets are low it is hard to look as good as Hollywood. But there is some wrapping material in most of the stories themselves. For example: efficiency. An efficient car may be good for the environment - but you will convince more people to buy it, by explaining what a nice piece of high-tech it is. And most will be won over, if you can also prove it to be saving money. The more positive benefits for themselves they find within your concepts, the more people will be willing to spend their time listening.

A story to tell:

If you want to convince people to drive less often you may start by showing themselves stuck in the midst of the daily rushhour jam. The problem is 'their' problem and the audience would love to hear an idea how this daily waste of time could be ended. Their first idea will be to ask for more roads - but you may convince them that this new roads may be built near to their own house bringing lots of noise and polluted air. At this point you may introduce the idea of using public transport. This definitely is bad news for most people.

But you may steal one of their first arguments by mentioning that most of the villages today are poorly connected to public transport. Start asking for the government to change this. The audience will calm down again. Somebody else has to act before they have to change habits! But now you let the ball bounce back. The government won't spend money for additional public transport as long as the people don't even use the existing capacities. Up till today more railway lines are closed than (re)opened - at least in Germany. At this point it would be nice to have a group of citizens who really fought for the reopening of a railway line, they worked hard, they were successful,. And at the end some glad citizens are telling that they feel much better since they can reach their work without stress - having nice chats with their neighbours while travelling to work - and even save money by having sold their second car. That is good news hiding the bad news. The viewer may feel invited to do like they did because their argumentation sounds logical - and success is always sexy. When reading the case study for the alpine region I found some of these ideas within the scientific text - a good step into the right direction. Like our anchorman often is saying: you have to use 'stories' as a kind of 'trojan horse'.

Emotions are stronger than arguments.

If the audience has the chance to see real people with real emotions, working hard to reach their goal, fighting against stupid ignorants, overcoming disturbing drawbacks, - then you have a story where people will want to know the outcome,. Here you have all this blood sweat and tears - and the happy ending - people love to see when looking at Hollywood stories. And even if the people acting in this story do not look like Brad Pitt: the audience will accept this, as these people are real heroes in the real world. Even better: They are 'riding a bike to save the world'. Now the viewer might get willing to accept a dose of theory - but it's safer to keep most of the it 'between the lines'. It's the same with advertisement: If you look at successful campaigns they use emotions, not arguments.

One hero is stronger than any group of teachers.

The next step to go may seem a step too far - but it is sometimes a necessary one. Even if you do have a perfect example to illustrate your concepts - they are mostly brought to existence after people like you worked with papers and convinced the local governments to do the right thing. No Hero, no Story? Sorry for that - but maybe you have to be heroes yourself. Like the citizens of our imaginary example you have to show that you had to fight for your ideas, against some stupid ignorants, had to solve problems..... Not every detail should be discussed in public - but if you present a story with up's and down's, with at least some suspense and emotion, you will reach far more people compared to any attempt at teaching them. If you get in contact with a journalist who is trying to find at least a facette of adventure in your story: don't be shy, As long as neither he nor you are overacting, he is doing you a favour. Besides: Politicians do not work as 'heroes', the audience would soon smell a sour taste of 'election-campaign' . If there is absolutely no hero at hand - you may even invent one. For presenting the EST! Scenarios- and findings I'm actually producing a completely fictional story, sending an actor into the future. Hero and 'story' are fictional: the facts aren't. He will be a 'brother' of Mr Alpinetree of the 'alpine case study'..... to be broadcasted at January 14th.

Steady drop is carving the stone.

Very few single publications have the power to change the world. The Watergate-publication was one rare example. Another one is 'silent spring' by Rachel Carson. She was a master in touching the souls of her readers. And even they had thousands of follow ups to 'carve the stone'. You will need a whole bunch of publications. Again and Again. There seems to be a kind of critical mass. When more than 5 different mayor newspapers or news-shows cover a topic within one week you can be pretty sure that everyone will be covering this topic the following week - but the more complex a topic is, the smaller the chance to get such a chain-reaction.

To start it, you need a kind of incident which is 'big' enough to attract many eyes. Just think of the Elbe-flood which started a slight revival of the old discussion about climate change in the German media. But even with things like this - it will take dozens and more such incidents,

years and years of steady media presence to make the step from 'being heard' to 'being understood' - and much more work on any aspect of public awareness until this will change habits and trends. Of course it gets easier the more people do feel a need for change by themselves. It is cynical - but each flood is doing a better work on this than any TV Feature will ever be able to achieve.

Once more: the role of 'stories and heroes'

Do you know the TV serial 'Ally Mc. Beal'? It's quite popular in many parts of the world. It was the first TV-serial featuring a washroom as a regular part of the set. Not any washroom, but a unisex-one. Man and woman talk together through thin walls between each closet and meet afterwards washing their hands and fixing the makeup. Why do I mention this ? Some years after the show started, I found several articles about unisex-washrooms. Small, innovative companies did implement them as part of their 'corporate concept'. They seem to become trendy wherever this serial is shown. What might have happened if these popular figures would have had some of their dialogues in the 'bicycle lot' of the company ? Maybe even discussing the advantages of not needing a car in the city?

(Again: don't overact - if people feel 'taught' the show will be a flop) If your concepts find their way into these 'everyday stories', into the subconscious of the society, then the process has a chance to get rolling.

I will finish by trying to answer Question 12 and 13 of your issues paper:

How does advertising support unsustainable transport behaviour and how could it be used to make transport behaviour more sustainable ? In my eyes the role of pure advertising is quite small. It is the least credible kind of media presence. It may help to support a climate, a consciousness, but it won't have any measurable effect without the more subtle paths, from journalism to everyday entertainment, including popular figures giving positive examples for the behaviour you want to achieve.

If you want to use advertisement you should try a more indirect approach. A 'commercial' for public transport will have less effect on peoples behaviour than a commercial promoting new jeans - assuming that a popular brand is presenting these jeans in a public tram instead of a sixties car.

Are counter-advertising and denormalisation plausible strategies for reducing car ownership and use ? They may be parts of a campaign and may work if backed up by additional paths as described above. But you won't change the habit's of a passionate driver by telling him that driving is a bad thing to do. If you try too hard, he will get angry at you and never listen again! You need to work with emotions, positive identification, clever solutions - and never ever let the audience know that you are teaching them!

Michael Houben, Am Hollerbroch 31a, D 51503 Roesrath, (49)2205-910197,
mail@mhouben.de