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## Malaysian Environmental NGOs on the World Wide Web: Communicating Campaigns through the Power of Photographs

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### Abstract

Photographs are one of the key aspects available on environmental websites that may transcend environmental stories in ways that words cannot. Lately, photographs are used widely in communicating the environment campaigns online. Three environmental NGOs in Malaysia (ENGOMs) were chosen for this study. A content analysis was conducted on their websites to investigate how they used photographs as powerful tools to communicate environmental campaigns and potentially call people to take action. The result indicates that MNS had well utilised the photographs for its online campaigns, whereas both of WWFM and SAM had moderately utilised the photographs for the same purpose.

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### 1. Introduction

Environmental communication researchers and advocates have focused on raising public awareness and mobilising support in areas such environmental online campaigns (EOC), website design, website interactivity, website content, etc. Such research is important because EOC is influenced by how communities, stakeholders and policymakers devote greater attention to issues that are salient to the public. Since the Internet has had an impact on

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almost all environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in the west from 1990s, a plethora of online campaigns has emerged since then.

Cottle (2008) argued that mobilisation constitutes the main goal of the ENGOS by motivating people into advocacy campaigns. Further, campaigns via World Wide Web (WWW) enable ENGOS to address the public in a cost efficient way and in return give the government and the public the control to engage only with issue-related concerns. For example, grievances about the idleness of international politics with regard to popular global environmental issues such as pollution, wild life, forestry and climate change unite people locally, regionally, and globally. The special features of the WWW or websites could facilitate the development of advocating and campaigning of environmentalists across the world. Normally expensive campaigns could be done not only faster, but cheaper online.

The most successful e-campaign proves that the innovative use of the websites can drastically empower NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations). 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) argued 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 suggested that websites must represent multicultural traditions to which general public are accustomed such as photographs, identity, logo, colour, and language as these elements affect social and communication practices.

Scholars from environmental communication have also argued that images or photographs are effective tools for communicating about environmental issues and achieving the aforementioned awareness and advocacy goals (Mungai, 2009). 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 provided much information for this study as did resources about environmental online campaign, but very few addressed both subjects as one entity. In order to close this gap, this study investigates how the environmental NGOs in Malaysia (ENGOMs) design their websites by using photographs to communicate environmental campaigns online and potentially call people to take action.

### *1.1. Environmental websites and online campaigns*

Cox (2006) said that advocacy campaigning is a strategic course of action involving communication undertaken for a specific purpose and usually it has its own objectives, purposes, and different target audiences. A campaign has to be planned and designed according to the target audience, for example government and politicians - to influence the regulation of law or legislation; general public or community - to create environmental awareness, influence societal attitudes and behaviour, and also to mobilise citizens to take action; media - to create broad coverage, publicity or campaigns. Typically, environmental advocacy campaigns differ from other types of information campaigns as the campaigns normally seek to change the public attitudes (Cox, 2006).

The dynamic nature on the use of the websites by ENGOS for campaigns clearly illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of both the medium and the ENGOS. They establish websites to campaign and call people to participate and take action, build awareness, facilitate training programmes, reduce costs, raise funds, manage information, disseminate information, communicate with others and avoid travel costs (Özdemir, 2012). Several international campaigns have been advocated successfully online, for examples, Laguna Campaign in 1994 (Scherr, 2002) and the Climate Campaign Berlin in 1995 (Mejin, 2007). These two campaigns were well-designed and exploited creatively, had effectively provided countless highly efficient opportunities to enhance relationships, gain support, and improve donor satisfaction throughout the campaigns which took place simultaneously in different countries. This was the first time campaign information was planned and designed specifically for the WWW. It comprised a central page with links to press releases, reports, photographs and even an interactive quiz. Certainly, this big event proved that the website affords rapid communication between distant people and organisations and allowed people to monitor campaign progress; it could not only inform, educate, manage resources, and fundraise, but could also strongly increase advocacy which potentially mobilise people to take action.

Interestingly, Keck and Sikkink (2004) argued that there was strong evidence on the connection between the use

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