Rio +20: Media Representations of the Green Economy

SHI-LING KOU

Abstract

The tumultuous debate over the controversial Green Economy concept and its core paradigm of natural capital valuation during the “Rio +20” United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (20-22 June, 2012) was anticipated and well documented by the media. This paper identifies how media representation was crucial in facilitating the formation of opposing stakeholder parties, and their uses of internet media to influence public perspective. Findings indicate that opinions are polarised between governments and businesses, which support the Green Economy, and environmentalists and indigenous communities, who radically oppose the alleged ‘privatisation of nature’. Overall, media ‘Commentators’ present a well-rounded perspective on the merits and weaknesses of the Green Economy.

Keywords: sustainability; Rio +20; media; corporate capture; natural capital; indigenous.

Introduction

The “Rio +20” United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (20-22 June, 2012) held in Rio de Janeiro marked the twentieth anniversary of the first of such symposia in 1992, when the term ‘sustainable development’ was thrust into the media limelight by politicians, economists and environmentalists alike. Sustainable development philosophy emphasises the importance of considering intergenerational and intragenerational equality by recognising that environmental resources have limitations in their capacity to be exploited (WECD 1987). This was to be achieved through appropriate environmental governance, resource management and international cooperation. For the next twenty years, ‘sustainable’ strategies were optimistically publicised as the solution to environmental degradation and worldwide poverty.

While this represented a colossal positive shift in political ideology among world leaders, it is clear that the regulations set in Agenda 21, a key product of Rio 1992, have failed to curb increasing levels of natural resource destruction. Retrospective analysis suggests that this was largely due to a lack of appropriate socioeconomic and political catalysts required to apply the idealistic theory to practice (Brand 2012). A string of embarrassingly futile global summits, including several United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conferences, completed the picture of political inadequacy. Thus, the neoliberal striving for continuous economic growth prevailed. The early twenty-first century has already been defined by the 2007-2008 Food Crisis, climate change issues and the continuing Global Financial Crisis.

It is in this complex context which Rio +20 sought to make an impact on global sustainable development. Among Rio +20’s foci, the ‘Green Economy’ development concept was by far
the most controversial and achieved wide media coverage. The Green Economy is a model in which sustainability considerations play a significant role in economic decisions, and aims to be “low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive” (UNEP 2012). It advocates the use of a triple-bottom line, which theoretically places economic, environmental and social well-being in equal importance. Central to the Green Economy is the valuation of ‘natural capital’, which is a way of assessing the economic value of a natural resource so that it can be compared to financial, physical and human capital, for example. The Green Economy is therefore an extension of free market environmentalism ideology. Indeed, a defining factor for the Rio +20 was the giant delegation of the business and industry sectors (second only to national governments), which highlighted businesses as key players in future sustainability schemes (BASD 2012).

It is acknowledged that any new sustainable economic model must tackle the current strategies that encourage unsustainable globalisation (Henderson 2007). While the Green Economy does not replace ‘sustainable development’, it emphasises the importance of being sustainable purely through manipulating the economy (UNEP 2011). Proponents of natural capital valuation argue that to integrate sustainability into an economic model, it must take on a comparable form to other industries. Environmentalists, indigenous communities and a variety of other stakeholders (see Table 1) are concerned that this will ultimately lead to corporate capture and can be used to legitimise environmental exploitation.

The vigorous support of the Green Economy by governments and businesses, and the outcry against the ‘privatisation of nature’ by environmentalists and indigenous communities, has been well documented in regional and global media. The Internet age has allowed Rio +20 to be publicised to a much greater extent than the previous two Earth Summits (in 1992 and 2002) and encourages all stakeholders and opinions to be voiced. Equally, social and mainstream media can powerfully influence public awareness and perception of the Green Economy by manipulating the framing, tone and political alignment of published material (Holt and Barkemeyer 2012). This report seeks to identify what the Green Economy means for different citizens, and how this is portrayed by internet media supporting various stakeholders. In particular, it will focus on the reception of the ‘natural capital’ concept and the controversy surrounding corporate capture, which currently dominates Green Economy discourse.

Methods

The methods involved using media analysis techniques on broad types of media outlets to identify possible trends in how the Green Economy is portrayed. Among the large agenda-setting newspapers available online, the New York Times (USA), the Guardian (UK) and the Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) were chosen for analysis. The Huffington Post, an American news website ranked first in eBizMBA’s 15 Most Popular Political Sites list (eBizMBA, 2012), was also chosen for its high readership and related public outreach capacity. The majority of the articles came from non-newspaper sources, including analysis blogs, non-government organisations (NGOs) and UN-affiliated sites. These were identified through a Google search for the specific, neutral keywords ‘green economy’ and ‘Rio +20’.

The plethora of online articles on the Rio +20 Green Economy debate was narrowed down to fifty-one articles (Appendix 1), published between 1 May and 31 July, 2012, for detailed analysis. Specifically, these fifty-one were chosen because they expressed inherent opinions, viewpoints or biases, rather than being a mere recount of events at Rio +20.
While it is impossible to numerically categorise standpoints into unambiguous groups since many authors tackled the issues from a combination of angles, general trends of particular stakeholder views were preserved in the sample space. The articles were classified according to:

- The author’s stance on the Green Economy debate;
- The date of publishing in relation to the Rio +20 Conference (20 articles before, 14 during and 17 after 20-22 June, 2012);
- The institution under which the article was published (international panel, government, corporate, non-government organisation, online newspaper, and other commentators).

**General stakeholders and trends identified in the media**

The media representation of any provocative debate will always be biased to different levels by the source’s political alignment and its self interest in influencing responses. Stakeholders identified in the online media were classified into three general groups (Tables 1 and 2). Although these classifications are useful for comparison, they are not definitive as many authors expressed and supported standpoints from a variety of angles. Most articles took a stance between strong opposition and strong support for the Green Economy. While no report was entirely neutral, the Commentators generally provided a less biased, more critically informed viewpoint that identified shortfalls in the current concept and offered tentative solutions. In contrast, the most radical language was found in articles by environmentalists, indigenous peoples and corporate representatives, who all actively sought to justify their arguments in the eyes of the public.

**Table 1: Classification of viewpoints expressed in the media**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalists and Indigenous Peoples</td>
<td>Radically opposed to the Green Economy, which is viewed as corporate capture and the privatisation of nature</td>
<td>Environmentalist NGOs including Greenpeace, Indigenous activist groups, some developing country commentators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commentators</td>
<td>Frustrated at the lack of political commitment to improve sustainability at Rio +20, but recognises that the Green Economy has both merits and disadvantages</td>
<td>Newspaper analysts and opinion page writers, some non-government commentators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments and businesses</td>
<td>Openly support the Green Economy, which is emphasised to be the logical step forward in modernising current economic models</td>
<td>Corporate representatives, UN and government officials, especially those from developed countries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Newspapers and other Commentators had arguably less motive than environmentalists, indigenous peoples and corporate representatives to shape meaning and influence public response since they did not directly represent stakeholders. However, there were clear trends that American and British newspapers reflected in their respective government’s support for the Green Economy and natural capital valuation schemes. Australian newspapers were somewhat subtler in their political alignment. This may reflect the current political situation where the Australian Labor Party is narrowly forming Government due to the support of The Australian Greens, who strongly lobby for ecologically sustainable economic strategies where “governments have an essential role in regulating markets” and therefore neither
wholly support nor refute the Green Economy concept in its most literal form (The Greens, 2013). The innate bias with which newspaper articles were written was partially offset by Opinion Page articles that represented a range of perspectives. For the purposes of analysis, extreme right or left wing columnists were classified as those in favour or disfavour of the Green Economy respectively, although these were an exception rather than the norm in most Opinion Page articles. Smaller regional newspapers like the Illawarra Mercury employed more radical language, possibly because their readership includes particular social groups that are likely to share similar opinions with those published.

Overall, significant changes in tone from tentatively hopeful to disappointed, cynical and outraged, from before to after Rio +20, were identified in the articles chosen for close analysis (see Table 2 and Appendix 1). This reflects the tone of failure with which Rio +20 closed, unable to reach binding policies and definitive targets (Eilperin, 23 June 2012; Taylor, 24 June 2012; McDonald, 24 June 2012; Hoedeman, 27 June 2012; Confino, 27 June 2012).

Table 2: Detailed summary of the sources of selected articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly opposed to the Green Economy (16)</td>
<td>African Brains</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate Europe Observatory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green Left Weekly</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Greenpeace International</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Huffington Post</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Illawarra Mercury</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indigenous Environmental Network</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter Press Service (India)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morning Star</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>New York Times</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reason Online</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World Development Movement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognises merits and disadvantages of the Green Economy (20)</td>
<td>Fair Observer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Climate Central</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate Europe Observer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental Leader</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical Corporation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial News</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Globalisation 101</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Huffington Post</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Herald Tribune</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>New York Times</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Swissinfo</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sydney Morning Herald/Sun Herald</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Economist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly in support of the Green Economy (15)</td>
<td>Caribarema Antigua</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business Day South Africa</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energy Envirofinland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Detailed analysis by group**

**Those radically opposed to the Green Economy**
Among the stakeholders who are strongly opposed to the Green Economy are environmental, indigenous and social activists, and the media outlets whose articles quote these activist leaders. Greenpeace Executive Director Kumi Naidoo’s declaration that the final document from Rio +20 was the “longest suicide note in history” (McDonald, 24 June 2012) summarises the sentiments of most environmental and indigenous activist organisations. The historical failures of businesses to deliver promises on corporate sustainability has contributed to the air of mistrust that corporations can be ‘volunteers’ in the absence of solid, international regulatory frameworks (Brand 2012). Bailey (18 June, 2012) cynically labels this as ‘Green Crony Capitalism’ while Corporate Europe Observatory, a research and campaign group working to expose corporate lobbying in the EU, declares that business lobbies have essentially “hijack[ed] the third Earth Summit” (19 June 2012). In agreement, Graciela Romero, War or Want International Programmes Director, accuses transnational corporations of using their “money, size and power to ... take full advantage of the move towards privatisation to influence the policies of governments” (19 May 2012). A report by Friends of the Earth (2012) suggested that the major flaw in these public-private partnerships is that UN agencies are progressively becoming more financially reliant on the very same companies they seek to regulate.

On the dangers of natural capital valuation, indigenous peoples and other NGOs campaign through online media to save natural landmarks and prevent indigenous displacement. “How can you sell Mother Earth and Father Sky?” an Ecuadorian Amazon tribal leader rhetorically asks (Indigenous Environment Network, 25 June 2012). Apocalyptic images appear popular in media framing: “ecocide” is inevitable as the international community “sleepwalk[s] towards terrible disasters” (Dyer, 26 June 2012), while the Nigerian poet and activist Nnimmo Bassey describes natural capital as a “cover for continued rape of African natural resources” (African Brains, 14 June 2012). In a creative publicity stunt, the World Development Movement (WDM) set up the ‘Great Nature Sale’ on Ebay to mock the concept of natural capital. By auctioning off famous natural sites like the Amazon, WDM hoped to ridicule the UK government’s support for “quantifying [ecosystems] so they can be ... ultimately sold off to whoever has the most money” (WDM, 20 June 2012).

**Those in strong support for the Green Economy**
The frame with which businesses and governments represent the Green Economy is an entirely different playing field compared to that of the eco-activists. Throughout the corporate
world, there appears to be sustained emphasis that the time is ripe for sustainable change – “Can there be such thing as green growth? ... The answer is an emphatic ‘Yes’” (Wales, 18 June 2012). Free market environmentalists believe that without government regulation, market forces will ensure that environmental action occurs to minimise damages to profit margins, and maintain a favourable corporate reputation. Historically, the private sector has indeed been quicker than governments to respond to environmental constraints to growth (Stroup 2008). The ongoing financial crisis is also an encouragement to seek new investment opportunities, potentially in natural capital (Brand 2012). Already, corporate representatives are keen to publicize sustainable investments they have already undertaken, particularly voluntary initiatives (Engelbrecht, 18 May 2012; Vorhies, 17 June 2012; Wales, 18 June 2012; Reuters, 18 June 2012). According to Engelbrecht (18 May 2012), almost one third of 2800 companies agree that sustainability is improving their profit margins. As such, Vorhies’ declaration in an American news site for entrepreneurs that “clearly, businesses can be part of the solution here” (Forbes, 17 June 2012) is currently echoing around the business world.

Governments from the global north have responded with equal enthusiasm, albeit with an angle that does not criticise their role in decreasing market efficiency. The UN stresses that the Green Economy represents a change “from crisis to opportunity” (UNEP 2011, p. 8). In an online-published speech (13 June 2012), the European Commissioner for Environment, Janez Potocnik, proclaimed that the Green Economy is “our survival strategy ... countries that learn to use their natural capital in a smart and sustainable way will be the winners of tomorrow.” With the UNEP (2011) suggesting that governments should reform policies, offer incentives and improve market infrastructure in order to accommodate the Green Economy, it is no wonder that Georg Kell, the UNCG’s Executive Director (Confino, 15 June 2012) calls the public-private partnership “a wonderful combination”.

Commentators of the Green Economy Debate
The Commentators in the media generally had limited direct self-interest in the outcome of the Green Economy debate, and thus could arguably analyse the situation more holistically. An outcome of this is that a wide spectrum of opinions was found in this group of newspaper and NGO analysts, unlike the radical supporters and opponents detailed above. However, Rio +20’s failure to realise the “scale and urgency of action required” (Taylor, 24 June 2012) and the risks of political domination by business representatives were widely acknowledged. Indeed, scornfully calling the Summit “Rio minus 20” became common as the conference dragged on (McDonald, 24 June 2012). Most analysts are sceptical that such a massive paradigm shift as the Green Economy will transition smoothly, particularly since it is a long-term process whose effects can be unpredictable and initially invisible – after all, economics is not a science, and thus cannot be treated as one (Stubbs and Stevens, 18 June 2012; Bjerregaard, 15 June 2012). Marx (Ethical Corporation, 11 July 2012) points out that the public’s expectation that businesses can only genuinely contribute to the Green Economy by denouncing their profit-driven capitalist model is unrealistic. The public, influenced by skewed media representation, may not realise that the idea behind the Green Economy is that ecologically sustainable practices are theoretically meant to coincide with corporate self-interest. On the other hand, relying on business initiatives to solve environmental problems because governments are inadequate is disconcerting to most stakeholders (Hoedeman, 27 June 2012). It is highly likely that of 81% of surveyed businesses that say they have incorporated sustainable initiatives into their business plans, very few have done enough so far (Elkington, 21 June 2012). Most reports agree that, in the words of Confino (27 June 2012), there is “too much
self-satisfaction amongst companies who believe having a strategy and sustainability report represents job done”. No critic can deny that the road to transforming capitalism will be a long and arduous one.

Overall development still remains limited, but there is a promising trend for initiatives that demand companies to regularly report their social and environmental impacts. According to UNEP’s Executive Director Steiner and co-authors King and Mulder, 80% of stock exchange survey respondents felt that “the time is ripe” for a “global policy framework on corporate sustainability reporting” (1 June 2012). Therefore, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Coalition, a group of investors, UN agencies and NGOs led by the British insurer Aviva, was somewhat considered by the media as a silver lining of the otherwise dismal Rio +20. The Economist (22 June 2012) scathingly blames the US, India and Kazakhstan for objecting to mandatory reporting of greenhouse-gas emission and water usage data (among other indicators), which resulted in an overall “flimsier” than expected agreement, only a “modest success” for Aviva’s lobby. On the other hand, Gittins (23 June 2012) praises Australia’s involvement in the UN’s System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA), an accounting framework that quantitatively examines how the environment and the economy interact, which prepares natural capital to be effectively integrated into economic models (UN, 2012). Most Commentators agree with Krouse (20 June 2012), who welcomes reporting initiatives but still recognises that even if Deutsche Bank, HSBC, RBS and the like are producing annual sustainability reports, they can be too “vague and have broad scopes” or disregard parts of the ecological footprint associated with trading with or investments in other companies. Global frameworks for sustainability reporting are, nonetheless, certainly the next step forward in achieving environmental accountability in the business world.

The media gives many negative examples of corporations displaying a facade of environmental awareness while investing in heavily exploitative projects, but the comparable number of positive accounts is encouraging. For example, the Greenpeace Detox campaign to eliminate toxic materials out of global supply chains has found commitment from major clothing brands including Puma, Adidas, Nike and H&M (Elkington, 21 June 2012). Jim Leape, the Director General for WWF International, announced that twenty companies, including Unilever, Coca-Cola and Walmart, pledged to eradicate deforestation from their supply chains (New York Times, 24 June 2012). Companies like mining giant Vale, voted the worst company of the year in the 2012 Public Eye Awards (Public Eye Awards, 2012) yet, a major financer of the Rio +20 Conference itself, are put to shame by the positive examples. Thus, hope that a “phoenix economy will rise from the ashes of crisis” (Elkington, 21 June 2012) can still exist.

Conclusion
Rio +20 was deeply criticised for its inability to forge strong, binding policies and targets for sustainable development. However, arguably its most significant contribution was to put the Green Economy concept into the spotlight, including the notions of natural capital valuation that accompany it. These models continue to be extremely controversial because the wider public perceives the potential risks of corporate capture to be substantial, but may recognise the urgency with which new, sustainable economic paradigms are needed. This has spawned an extremely wide variety of responses to the Green Economy. The formation of these groups was vitally facilitated by the press and the internet media which were, in turn, used by all the groups to influence public opinion. Ultimately, this raging debate is a major reason for the delayed take-off of the Green Economy concept, which ruminates as a seemingly endless work-in-progress among stakeholders. In his Rio +20 address, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-
Moon said that “we need nothing less than a revolution in our thinking about the foundations of dynamic growth and the well-being of future generations”. Whether the Green Economy is this “revolution” remains to be seen.

References


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Holt, D and Barkemeyer, R (2012). Media Cogerage of Sustainable Development Issues – Attention Cycles or Pubctuated Equilibrium? Sustainable Development, 20, 1-17


Romero, G (2012). Business as usual is not an option, Morning Star, 19 June. UN Rio +20 CSF Media Coverage, p193-195


Appendix 1: List of online media articles analysed


All Africa (2012). Rio+20 - Friends of the Earth International to Meet With UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon - ‘Stop the Business Lobby At the UN’, All Africa, 21 June. UN Rio +20 CSF Media Coverage, p179-180

All Africa (2012). Rio+20 Declaration - a Gift to Corporate Polluters, All Africa, 22 June. UN Rio +20 CSF Media Coverage, p177-178


Romero, G (2012). Business as usual is not an option, Morning Star, 19 June. UN Rio +20 CSF Media Coverage, p193-195


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NB: Articles without a URL can be found at: