

## **Ozone Depletion: Is the Media Doing Enough?**

It is internationally recognized that the ozone depletion problem is among the Earth's most important environmental problems. Simply put, the ozone layer is a layer of gas that protects the Earth from the harmful portion of sun rays. This layer is being damaged by man-made chemicals. As a result of weakening of this shield, the ozone concentrations are reduced. Hence more UV radiations reach the Earth with a higher intensity leading to adverse effects on human and biological life. The health of millions of people is affected where the rates of skin cancer and eye cataracts have alarmingly increased. The growth and productivity of plants is compromised and marine species are threatened. The main chemicals involved are the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in refrigeration, aerosols, and as cleaners in industries, the halons used in fire extinguishers and methyl bromide used mainly for soil fumigation in agriculture. The danger of these ozone-depleting substances is aggravated by their persistence in the atmosphere. In response to this problem and after intergovernmental negotiations, countries have agreed in 1987 to gradually phase out the ozone-depleting compounds. This agreement was called the Montreal Protocol.

Misconceptions about the ozone problem are prevalent among all sectors of society including the educated lay people. One of the most widespread beliefs is the nature of the damage caused to the ozone layer and its relation with UV radiation and adverse health effects. It is believed that the ozone layer has completely disappeared and it is the reason behind climate change. In fact, climate change may be contributing to ozone depletion and not the other way round. Also, people fail to recognize that a thinning of the ozone layer is being created in the stratosphere and the resulting higher UV levels contribute to the dangers of sun-related diseases such as damage to eyes, skin and immune system.

Public confusion and the lack of knowledge stem from inaccurate or under-reporting of the ozone depletion problem. Most information people collect about the environment come from television, newspapers, radio or magazines. In addition to the media, scientists also share the responsibility for the lack of or inaccurate information. Often, scientists have difficulty translating the complex technical science to plain language to be understood by the general readers. On the other hand, there is an abundance of published articles in academic journals and magazines on the technical aspect of this problem. Papers on the health implications, the environmental effects, interactions with climate change, chemical reactions and composition of the ozone-depleting substances, modeling, air quality and others have been identified. However, the relation between media and ozone depletion has rarely been addressed. That is why there is a need to discuss the role of media and its influence on the public. It is important to note that it is not intended to

criticize the media but to recognize and emphasize its role in shaping people's knowledge, attitudes and practices.

In the last few years, the tense and unstable political situation shifted the public attention into daily social, economic and political concerns. So, the crisis and new priorities lead to a complete shift of the media in all its forms to a single direction extremely far from environmental problems. For example, all TV stations present loads of political shows, news and entertainment events. There are seldom environmental documentaries or reports that discuss similar problems and suggest solutions. Often when this is the case, it is mainly driven by political agendas. With regard to newspapers, in spite of their large number, only few designate daily sections on environmental problems or publish comprehensive reports on this issue.

The media through its diverse resources can significantly contribute to increased access to information. Lebanon is considered as one of the countries characterized by diverse and influential media in the Middle East. For a population of around 4 million people, more than 6 local TV stations (most having international channels), 12 daily newspapers and around 60 magazines are currently active in Lebanon. There is a need to identify an effective strategy to redirect the attention of the media to the ozone depletion problem and benefit from what is considered nowadays as the most powerful weapon. The ultimate goal would be to educate the public, challenge and alter their misconceptions. To effectively accomplish this goal, there is a need for an aggressive media campaign regarding the ozone depletion problem using a wide variety of media materials. The methods are numerous, including but not limited to: talks to local groups and schools, presentations at community events, filming of documentaries, news releases, fact sheets, websites, interviews or articles and responses to individual inquiries for information.

In view of the above, TV stations are encouraged to assign regular reports on environmental problems, specifically on ozone depletion and introducing documentaries or short films. Also, simple and short messages on daily practices such as the use of "ozone friendly" aerosol spray cans would have major impact on public awareness and would provide them with practical tips to contribute to change. Newspapers are also encouraged to include daily reports, advertisements and frequent coverage for events and announcements such as national/international environmental contests. Thus, effective and accurate reports may assist in stirring the public's consciousness on specific problems in their societies. The importance of increasing awareness about this problem lies in three main sectors of the community: the general public, the non governmental organizations (NGOs) and decision makers/politicians.

- The general public is more likely to take responsibility for their environment and actions. People's involvement in decision making would increase.

- NGOs will be more knowledgeable and capable of building partnerships with other stakeholders and engage parties such as government officials and media. This contributes to their development and growth.
- Public understanding and pressure can mediate the views of politicians and decision makers. Hence, they would be more willing to consider the ozone problem when legislating and supervising government actions and amending policies.

There is no doubt that changes to the environment are sustainable when applied at the grassroots level. This implies that change is based on the political force of people to take a collective action on their own behalf. This power emerges from local people who apply strategies and skills for lobbying, campaigning, organizing meetings and writing letters to eventually contribute to solving the problem. People will no more assume the role of isolated and passive individuals; rather they will have a powerful role in voicing their opinions and making a real difference.

A preferred method to involve the public is through conducting quantitative and qualitative research to assess the level of their understanding and perception concerning this problem. The quantitative research can be done through surveys, interviews and telephone polls while the qualitative part can be done through focus groups and discussions. The goal must focus on identifying and understanding people's misconceptions and how they construct their own conceptual frameworks in relation to the ozone depletion problem. Better understanding of this data may lead to development of improved methods for dissemination of information and awareness campaigns.

The educational system can also contribute by introducing environmental journalism in universities and integrating this topic in school curricula. As a result, journalists specialized in covering environmental stories are more likely to produce interesting reports to which the public will react. If the lessons and information of ozone depletion are accurately communicated to the youth of today, then the future generation would be better equipped to handle the demands of the future. Similarly, journalists communicating with legal experts and scientists assume the critical role of media as bridging the gap between scientists and lay people.

The main challenge faced when addressing the issue of ozone depletion is its global perspective. Therefore, it is more difficult for the public to perceive it compared to local issues. For example, the sea pollution that occurred after the war in Lebanon in July / August 2006 is a problem which was relatively well understood and the public knew the proper actions to remedy the situation. All aspects of this problem were thoroughly covered by the media. The adverse health and environmental consequences were well emphasized. Interviews, presentations and a

number of reports and articles highlighted the urgent situation. As a response, NGOs, government officials and the public reacted to the problem. People felt involved and continually follow up on this matter. Conversely, the ozone problem is more complex since it is not a visible pollution and the associated health consequences are not directly observed. Furthermore, it is more difficult for people to understand the relationship between individual behaviors and their local and global impacts. This incurs many challenges in educating the public on the ozone problem and mobilizing the community to take actions. Therefore, there is a need to promote that local actions do not just produce local results but as a by-product, they lead to alleviation of a global problem.

In conclusion, the problem of ozone depletion is an interdisciplinary issue. Disciplines such as social sciences, economics, marketing, meteorology, chemistry, anthropology, biology and politics need to be incorporated when designing public awareness campaigns and educational activities. Unless there is a strategy leading to building trust and cooperation between the civil society and government officials, it is unlikely that change will be introduced. At the end, perhaps the ingredients of a successful recipe should include a scientifically knowledgeable press, an interested public, no hidden agendas, political will, supportive community representatives, an environment supporting communication and a sense of commitment among all individuals and parties.

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