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Greenwash Gold 2012: Mobilizing a Grassroots Movement

By: Brittany Dickey

Introduction

Greenwash Gold 2012 is a campaign that aimed to shine light on the destruction and devastation 3 sponsors of the Olympics -- BP, Dow and Rio Tinto -- caused while pretending to be good corporate sponsors. These companies used the Olympics to “greenwash”¹ their corporations.

The three organizations that joined together to start this campaign are The Bhopal Medical Appeal, London Mining Network, and UK Tar Sands Network.

I am interested in how Greenwash Gold 2012, a small grass roots campaign, used the 2012 Olympic Games in London to raise international awareness about issues surrounding the Olympics.

In June 2012, I visited London and interviewed three leaders of GWG: first, Jess Worth, co-founder of London Mining Network, second, Colin Toogood, spokesperson for Bhopal Medical Appeal, and third, Richard Sully, a coordinator at London Mining Network. In addition, I attended a rally to gain perspective on the London’s cultural context with respect to the right to protest. I researched the campaign website a few times each week and also found articles that mentioned the campaign. In October 2012, I interviewed Emily Coats, another campaigner for GWG. I also sent questions to Toogood and Coats after the interviews with the three leaders of GWG. I used all of this information to compile my analysis of the campaign.

Background

The 2012 Olympic Games were held in London. The city set precedent when members of the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) vowed to be the most sustainable (in terms of energy efficiency) Olympics of all time. Below is a depiction of the sustainability report that was released in April 2011 for the public’s review.

This London Sustainability report outlines various characteristics of energy efficiency, which includes climate change, waste, biodiversity, inclusion, and healthy living as sustainability themes (London Sustainability Report, 2012).

Progress at a glance	
Commitment	Status
Reduce carbon emissions arising from the operation of the built environment in the Olympic Park by 50 per cent by 2013	On track*
Achieve 15 per cent carbon dioxide reductions for permanent venues, beyond 2006 Building Regulations	On track
Deliver 20 per cent of all energy demands for the immediate post-Games legacy using on-site renewable sources	Target not achieved
Achieve BREEAM ‘Excellent’ rating for permanent venues (in legacy) at the Olympic Park	On track
All ODA development sites to register with CEEQUAL	Achieved
Build the Athletes’ Village to Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4	On track
Transport 50 per cent (by weight) of construction materials to the Olympic Park by rail or water	On track
Reduce the amount of drinking water used per person per day by 40 per cent in new permanent venues (other than the Village) measured against 2006 standards	On track
Use Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS)	On track where underlying geology and contamination allow
Plan and design to allow for one-in-100-year flood events, and a six millimetre per year sea level rise	On track
Reduce the amount of drinking water used in Athletes’ Village homes by 35 per cent, measured against average London consumption of 160 litres per day	On track
Work with partners, Thames Water and the Environment Agency to identify an appropriate source of water to supply through the non-potable water network	Achieved

* The ODA is seeking to deliver 7% of the 50% target through a local retrofit scheme in the four Host Boroughs.

¹ Greenwashing is defined as “a superficial or insincere display of concern for the environment that is shown by an organization” (dictionary.com).



The graph above displays the vision, themes, objectives, and target areas outlined in the sustainability report. In addition to the five themes present, LOCOG also presented the public with a progress report in April 2011. The comprehensive, easy to understand report displays the great sense of commitment LOCOG expressed on emphasizing sustainability during the Olympic Games. In addition to laying out a detailed plan of action to increase sustainability, LOCOG also included a progress report on all of the commitments made. This 126 page report extensively covers every area of concern for London Games. However, there is no mention of the sponsors anywhere in the report. This is a crucial area that was overlooked by LOCOG. Greenwash Gold 2012 used the opportunity provided by LOCOG to raise awareness about the major environmental damage and human rights abuses caused by the three sponsors, Dow, Rio Tinto, and BP.

Greenwash Gold 2012 was launched in a context of mass criticism of the Olympic Games. In recent years, “the IOC sells much bigger contracts to fewer sponsors. Top-tier deals are long-term (at least eight years) and global. The size of each deal is secret, but the total for all 11 for 2009-12 is \$957 million” (Micklethwait, 2012) . Sponsors are “paying to provide publicity for the Olympics”(Ibid). The overarching theme from most critics is that the Olympics “are about blatant commercialism and high paying corporate sponsors”(Humpreys, 2010). While promoting human rights may be one part of the Olympics, many critics argue that the “games are designed to make big bucks”(Ibid).

According to the Olympic Charter, “the goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity”(Olympic Charter, 2011, p.10).

Benefits of Sponsoring the Olympics

It is apparent that “corporations are willing to pay top dollar for access” to Olympic Game viewers (Humphreys, 2010). Investments in the Olympics are a “no-brainer” to sponsors, as more than two thirds of Olympic viewers said, “they’d choose Olympic sponsors over other companies”(Ibid.). There were “a billion viewers” watching “[the] opening ceremony for the Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008” (Cronin, 2012). Sponsors receive international exposure of their brands and there really isn’t a comparable facet of marketing. A study at Columbia College found that Olympic sponsors enjoy net income growth annually because of these investments.

A study by Jonathan Jensen of Columbia College, Chicago and Anne Hsu of Relay Worldwide, a sports-marketing firm, has found that in general companies that sponsor generously tend to do well. They looked at the 51 American firms that spent more than \$15m annually on sponsorship (mostly of sports) between 2005 and 2009. Net income at these firms grew faster than at S&P 500 firms in general (7.8% to 6.5% per year). The biggest sponsors did even better: the top 16, which spent on average \$160m a year on sponsorship, saw net income grow by 22.1% annually. (Micklethwait, 2012)

The benefits of the sponsors are exponential. Yet, these corporate sponsors are not held to any ethical standards according to Greenwash Gold 2012. The dichotomy of the goals of Olympism and the de facto reality of the emphasis on commercialism in the Olympic Games is the backdrop of GWG.

Criticisms of BP, Dow, and Rio Tinto

Criticisms of BP

The infamous BP oil spill in 2010 shifted the public’s perception of the sustainability of this corporation.

Prior to the oil spill, BP had been recognized as a leader in promoting sustainable business practices and more sustainable energy development. This is why many in the blogosphere jumped to BP's defense when the spill first occurred, citing the company's big investments in solar and alternative energy sources to combat the one-dimensional "oil-hungry" characterizations of critics. In the face of this disaster, however, BP appears to have lost its way. The company forgot the principles of accountability, transparency and relevancy that are the basis of any sustainable strategy; instead, BP opted for carefully measured responses that were seen as insincere and quickly depleted the equity it had built as a good company. (Sorenson, 2010)

The above excerpt details the process of BP “greenwashing” its brand through dishonesty and a failure to take responsibility for this environmental disaster. According to Sarah Sorenson, author of *The Sustainable Network: The Accidental Answer for a Troubled Planet*, “the most sustainable businesses are those that are able to positively impact all their constituents (including people and the planet) to maximize long-term economic opportunities” (Sorenson, 2010). BP failed to be honest, “downplaying the potential damage of the spill and being way too optimistic

in its predictions for when the oil spill would be stopped”(Ibid). Sorenson argues that BP needs to shift to an emphasis of accountability and transparency in order to be considered a sustainable company.

BP’s website outlines the company’s vision for reaching sustainability.

We can only operate if we maintain the trust of people inside and outside the company. We must earn people’s trust by being fair and responsible in everything we do. We monitor our performance closely and aim to report in a transparent way. We believe good communication and open dialogue are vital if we are to meet the expectations of our employees, customers, shareholders and the local communities in which we operate.
(Sustainability, 2012)



Stakeholder’s Engagement Chart
(Sustainability, 2012)

Below is an excerpt “from the BP website detailing how the company engages non-governmental organizations.

We met with NGOs in 2011 to discuss revenue transparency, human rights and operating in sensitive areas. During the preparation of our 2011 sustainability reporting, we met with

environmental and social NGOs in the UK, the US and Brazil in a roundtable format. The sessions, which were facilitated by an independent third party, helped BP to understand NGO expectations for the report and raised topics for ongoing dialogue.
(Sustainability, 2012)

The excerpt is very broad and the website lists no other action besides civil dialogue as an attempt to engage NGOs. While civic dialogue is crucial to corporate social responsibility, this alone is not enough for a company to be sustainable. There needs to be more of an emphasis on “straight talk” or a direct statement of the objectives for sustainability (Sorenson, 2010). What is actually being done and what plans for improvements does the company foresee?

According to greenwashgold.org, “BP is proudly restarting its deep-water drilling. It is also exploring the Arctic, where the volatile conditions make a Gulf-like spill both more likely to happen and much harder to control – and such a disaster would cause unprecedented damage to the fragile ecosystem” (2012).

The hypocrisy of BP being featured as a sponsor to the most sustainable Olympics is emphasized on the Greenwash Gold 2012 campaign website:

The irony of BP sponsoring the “Greenest Olympics ever” is actually palpable in the Gulf of Mexico. Although the BP media machine professes all is well in the gulf, oil and tar balls still wash ashore with dead dolphins, turtles and other animals; people are sick from toxic exposure, and fisher communities have lost their livelihood. How quickly the world forgets that on April 20, 2010 — the 40th anniversary of Earth Day— the United States experienced the largest oil drilling disaster in history. BP's blowout introduced 200 million gallons of oil and 2 million gallons of toxic dispersant into the Gulf, the effects of which we are still dealing with today. (Greenwash Gold, 2012)

Criticisms of Dow

Dow’s merge with Union Carbide, “the notorious US firm responsible for the 1984 gas disaster in Bhopal India” (Saville, 2012). According to Bhopal Medical Appeal:

On the night of December 2nd, 1984, a Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, began leaking 27 tons of the deadly gas methyl isocyanate. None of the six safety systems designed to contain such a leak were operational, allowing the gas to spread throughout the city of Bhopal [1]. Half a million people were exposed to the gas and 25,000 have died to date as a result of their exposure. More than 120,000 people still suffer from ailments caused by the accident and the subsequent pollution at the plant site.

The Indian Olympic Association was outraged and demanded that Dow be removed from the list of sponsors. According to The Guardian, “even former London mayor and big-time Olympics booster Ken Livingstone claimed the Dow debacle could create a ‘crisis of legitimacy for the Games’” (Boykoff, 2012).

Dow claims to have no connection with the disaster in Bhopal, India in 1984.

TDCC [The Dow Chemical Company] had no connection whatsoever with the Bhopal tragedy, which occurred 17 years before TDCC acquisition of UCC stock in 2001 and 12 years after the settlement was approved by the Court. The plant from which the gas leak occurred was owned by Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL), a partly-owned subsidiary of UCC [Union Carbide Corporation]. For this reason, the UOI [The Union of India] does not argue, nor could not argue, that TDCC did anything wrongful or had any culpability for the Bhopal tragedy. (The Bhopal Medical Appeal 2012)

While Dow maintains that the corporation has no liability in the Bhopal gas leak, According to Bhopal Medical Appeal, an organization that aims to help the survivors of the gas leak, “the victims weren’t consulted in the settlement discussions, and many felt cheated by their compensation – \$300-\$500 – or about five years’ worth of medical expenses”. In addition, the non-profit organization stresses the environmental damage that was never addressed by UCC. Also, there was toxic waste dumped in Bhopal by UCC. These chemicals cause health problems to the people who live in Bhopal.

Union Carbide also remains liable for the environmental devastation its operations have caused. Environmental damages were never addressed in the 1989 settlement, and the contamination that Union Carbide left behind continues to spread. These liabilities became the property of the Dow Corporation, following its 2001 purchase of Union Carbide. The deal was completed much to the chagrin of a number of Dow stockholders,

who filed suit in a desperate attempt to stop it. These stockholders were surely aware that a corporation assumes both the assets and the liabilities of any company it purchases, according to established corporate law. Indeed, Dow was quick to pay off an outstanding claim against Union Carbide soon after it acquired the company, setting aside \$2.2 billion to pay off former Union Carbide asbestos workers in Texas. However Dow has consistently and stringently maintained that it isn't liable for the Bhopal accident. (The Bhopal Medical Appeal, 2012)

How is it ethical to resolve the disputes of UCC workers in Texas and ignore the survivors of Bhopal India? Some argue that, "if America doesn't want a corporation to be held accountable, it won't be" (Toogood, 2012). Surely the IOC has an ethical obligation to review sponsors to ensure that all the themes of Olympism are seen in all facets of the Games.

The irony of Dow's connection with the Olympic Games which emphasizes human rights and environmentally friendly practices is apparent to others besides the Greenwash Gold 2012 campaigners. Critics in London argued that, "if the IOC and Locog want their sponsorship programs to have an ethical spine, they need to demonstrate some ethics of their own and show egregious green washers the door" (Boykoff, 2012).

Criticisms of Rio Tinto

According to Corporate Watch:

The actions of Rio Tinto Group worldwide exhibit systematic environmental and social abuses, which in their striking similarity and number cannot be reduced to individual incidents. Throughout all of the companies' operations there is a clear strategy of maximizing profitability by any means possible, including violation of local and international law; collusion and funding of armed repression; corruption, lobbying and political manipulation; price-fixing; aggressive union busting; wholesale environmental destruction; and negligent health and safety policies.(2012).

Particularly "the Freeport McMoRan mine at Grasberg, west Papua has...stimulated vast discontent amongst the indigenous people of the area" (Karlner, 2012). Also the "environmental devastation and social displacement caused by Rio Tinto's Panguna mine on the pacific island of Bougainville (mentioned above) was so great that it sparked an armed secessionist uprising by the local population..."(Ibid.).

Although Rio Tinto claims to "demand rigorous environmental stewardship," and also emphasizes "social wellbeing" in its definition of sustainability, there is evidence to suggest otherwise.

The Greenwash Gold campaigners believe that, corporations are elevating profit above public health" (Worth, 2012). Below is an excerpt from the GWG website.

Rio Tinto is bad news for many communities around the world. Its operations have failed to provide adequate protection of public health, the environment, workers and human rights. It is a scandal that it should be providing the metal for the London Olympic medals.

The campaigners displayed their outrage in several ways that I will detail in the next section.

Main Goals of Greenwash Gold 2012

The campaign aimed to raise awareness, create Public Relations disasters for the three corporate sponsors (BP, Rio Tinto, Dow), and to challenge the IOC for permitting these sponsors.

“What we are trying to do is influence the media in a way that affects Dow”. It’s not just about harming Dow but to target the PR.”(Toogod, 2012).

“Yes, we are saying to the Olympics Committee you should not have picked these companies” (Worth, 2012).

“It (sponsor’s revenue) is so lucrative that if the Olympics set stringent rules maybe some companies will clean up their act” (Worth, 2012).

“We can’t stop Rio Tinto from making the medals, but we do hope that we can tell the truth about what these companies are doing” (Solly, 2012).

The essence of the campaign was highlighting the hypocrisy of these unsustainable sponsors representing the most sustainable Olympics of all time. The sponsors use the Olympics “to brighten up their reputations” (Worth, 2012). The campaigners argue that if “the IOC insists athletes adhere to certain values, companies should be held to a standard of human rights” (Ibid.).

The campaign budgets were \$5,000 pounds and consist of 4 to 5 campaigners (Coats, 2012).

The Facets of the Campaign

Media	Protest	Social Media	Civic Dialogue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articles • Scholarly articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • *LOCOG Protest • *GWG award ceremony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • Blogs • Twitter • YouTube 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempted to meet with Lord Coe(*LOCOG Chair)

As displayed above, the major facets of the campaign were media, protest, social media, and civic dialogue.

Campaigners admonished the public to vote for the Olympics most unsustainable sponsor on the Greenwash Gold website. There were YouTube videos posted for each sponsor detailing why the public should vote for each corporation.

Media

While Greenwash Gold campaigners had little control over this element, the amount of mentions in the media positively affected the campaign because this increases awareness. According to Coats, there were 60 media mentions and international coverage in Italy, France, and the United States. Below is a clipping of a news story in Italy about GWG.



Protests

Protests at the LOCOG headquarters as well as in Trafalgar Square helped raise awareness for the campaign. According to the Guardian, “police sources confirmed that six individuals were arrested in Trafalgar Square for criminal damage... the individuals were led away in handcuffs after green custard used in the show spilled on to the ground”(Laville, 2012). The campaigners were doing a theatrical Greenwash Gold award ceremony. Three actors represented BP, Dow, and Rio Tinto. After Rio Tinto, the winner of the award for the most unsustainable sponsor, was awarded, all of the “companies” were drenched with green custard. This represented how these sponsors were attempting to greenwash their corporations by associating themselves with the most sustainable Olympics of all time. According to Meredith Alexander, a former member of the Commission for a Sustainable London 2012 the protestors “spilt a little bit of the green custard on the square and were in the process of cleaning it up when the police arrived”.

Jess Worth, co-founder of UK Tar Sands Network, said that, “There is a crackdown on the right to free speech and protest.” She explained during our interview that the crack downs got worst leading up to the Olympics. It was this interview that motivated me to go to the Defend the Right to Protest: The Olympics and Beyond Public Meeting, a protest rally to, “to discuss the issues, share experiences and build solidarity between groups and individuals who wish to defend their civil liberties in the face of this Olympic assault” (Defend the Right to Protest, 2012). I had the opportunity to meet Simon Moore, the infamous protestor who received and Anti-social

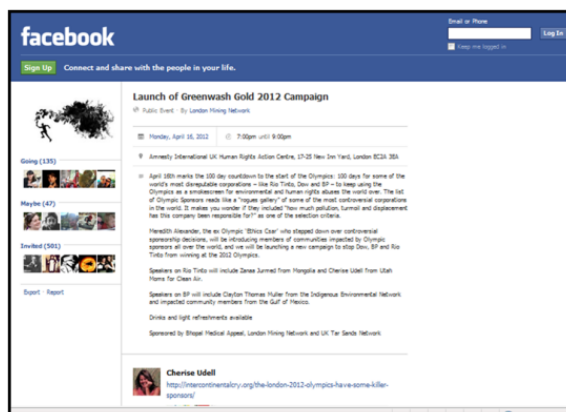
Behavioral Disorder² (ABSO). This ban basically restricts individuals from protesting. Moore received the ban for a sit-in at Leyton Marsh, a park near his neighborhood that was being destroyed in order for the use of the Olympics.

The Olympics were held in Beijing in 2008. One of the main differences in the context I wrote down between Beijing and London was that in Beijing protest was not allowed and protestors were arrested for peaceful protest. I assumed that in London this would not occur because the United Kingdom is a democracy with freedom of speech rights. Conversely, peaceful protestors received similar backlash for trying to exercise their inalienable rights. Lord Coe said the, “[the United Kingdom] is a democratic nation; we have a tradition of peaceful demonstrations as long as it doesn't become a public order issue, and we take it as that”(London Mining Network, 2012). Although it is said that peaceful protests are allowed, two of the three peaceful protests I followed resulted in arrests or pre-emptive bans.

These findings baffled me. Dana Shman, a protestor at the rally I attended, asked me to “imagine what America would be like if there was no Million Man March”? Many protestors I spoke to shared their jail experiences with me as if this was a normal occurrence. Protest is imperative to societal growth and change. In the context of the Olympics, freedom of speech is a human right that should be uplifted by the IOC. Rather than stifling speech, the IOC and London should foster an environment for protest to peacefully take place.

Social Media

GWG used Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Blogs to engage the community in different ways. Although there was not a page for GWG, viewers could share the website on their Facebooks. Also, London Mining Network, one of the non-profits that helped form the campaign, used its own Facebook to announce a launch event for GWG. YouTube was used to inform publics as well as foster an environment for dialogue.



Three videos were available, one for each sponsor, detailing creatively why each sponsor was the most unsustainable Olympic sponsor. While publics gained information from watching the videos, they also commented and asked questions about the campaigns. Viewers would hold conversations with each other as well. Dialogical communication is a way to foster community according to Lovejoy and Saxton. This site was instrumental for raising awareness for the campaign. The videos received 30,000 views.

² An Anti-Social Behavioral Order is a civil order made against a person who has been shown, on the balance of evidence, to have engaged in anti-social behavior. The orders, introduced in the United Kingdom by Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998, ^[1] were designed to correct minor incidents that would not ordinarily warrant criminal prosecution. ^[2] The orders restrict behavior in some way, by prohibiting a return to a certain area or shop, or by restricting public behavior such as swearing or drinking alcohol. Many see the ASBO as connected with young delinquents (www.wikipedia.com)

Although GWG did not have its own Twitter account, publics were encouraged to use the hash tag (#greenwash gold). The three non-profits that comprise the campaign (Bhopal Medical Appeal, UK Tar Sands Network, and London Mining Network) used the hash tag in their Twitter posts. Most posts were informative. The posts kept publics informed about the events of the campaign as well as the outcomes. Tweets were made about the arrest of GWG campaigners as well.

Lastly, a blog was posted on the campaign website that also kept publics informed about the campaign and other relevant information. For example, one blog post was about a documentary of the Bhopal disaster in India. The blogs kept the audience well educated about the injustices surrounding these sponsors and the Olympics in general.

Although social media could have been used more strategically to raise awareness, “the campaign never had any active recruitment drive on any... of the social networks” (Toogood, 2012). Toogood explained that the campaign was under-resourced and as a result did not have the funds or time to invest in social media.

Civic Dialogue

The campaigners tried several times to set up a meeting with Lord Coe, the chairman of LOCOG, to discuss the campaigners concerns with these three sponsors but he never replied. Also the campaign presented several Early Day motions, formal requests for a topic to be debated in Parliament, on behalf of GWG, Dow, and Bhopal Medical Appeal.

Conclusion

I learned from researching this campaign that a few people with passion and work ethic can raise awareness and make a difference. However, reaching goals takes more than just passion. These campaigners had a strategy and a vision. They knew what they wanted to accomplish. The campaigns main goal was to raise awareness about the unsustainability and hypocrisy of BP, Dow and Rio Tinto. This small campaign made international news and thus launched itself into international dialogue. While there is still progress to be made, this is a great start. Toogood summed up the campaign very well in the excerpt below:

What’s important to note about all of this is that GWG was TINY! Each of the three organizations which formed it was very, very small and, as explained; some things that might have seemed vital were simply not achieved. However, with some imagination, and judicious use of social and traditional media networks we were able to make an incredibly loud noise. It is not a surprise that there is so much discussion about censorship of the net as these mechanisms have enabled us to make a sound way out of proportion to our size and that is very frightening to those in positions of ‘power’.
Hurray!!(2012)

It is my hope to keep researching grass-roots campaigns so that when I want to sphere-head my own I will be well informed!

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