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MEDIA RELEASE

Public debate on energy shows fears and concerns amid mild optimism

Australia and China primary targets of criticisms

Public discussion and debate over energy, including nuclear, coal, wind, solar and other alternative sources, shows mild optimism that solutions will be found to balance environmental and economic interests, but serious fears and concerns also abound in relation to safety, the environment and consumer protection.

A study of public debate and discussion on energy examined through analysis of statements and commentary by organisations, spokespersons and consumers in leading mainstream and citizen media in Australia and Asia has found that, overall, discussion averaged 52.9 on a 0-100 scale where 50 is neutral or balanced. Also, it found positive messages outweighed negative messages about energy production and use – albeit the margin was narrow.

The analysis examined discussion and comment from the perspective of a balanced position between protecting the environment and maintaining economic development and standards of living.

Nuclear energy is the most discussed form of energy and is mired in controversy and near evenly divided opinion for and against, the analysis found. The study reported that the Asia Pacific region is at the centre of the global nuclear debate with 16 of 29 nuclear power plants that are under construction or proposed worldwide due to come into operation in East and South Asia in the next 10-15 years, according to published Atomic Energy Agency data.

Solar and wind power are being actively promoted by environmentalists, but are described in most discussions as not being able to make a substantial contribution to energy needs.

Despite a number of initiatives, governments are generally not seen to be doing enough.

Carbon trading is being welcomed by a majority of spokespersons and commentators and is set to become a multi-billion dollar industry over the next few years with the United Nations estimating carbon offsets trading will reach US\$35 billion in 2008. However, some are warning that it is still uncertain whether carbon trading will stimulate a net reduction in carbon emissions. Some energy producers and consumer groups have pointed to lessons in Europe where too many permits were issued, resulting in a price collapse below levels necessary to stimulate investment in carbon reducing initiatives.

Also, concerns are being expressed that carbon trading is insufficiently regulated and could lead to scams and fraudulent schemes. For instance, one leading environment group has warned that some companies are selling trees without accreditation and their claims of carbon credits or neutrality are not substantiated. The Australian Consumers Association also has expressed concern that consumers may be paying money in levies and surcharges with no guarantees that their money will be used to address climate change.

The report says: "While the efforts of some companies to reduce their carbon 'footprint' may be commendable and genuine, there is considerable concern over a lack of safeguards for consumers on how extra charges will be used and whether they will reduce carbon emissions."

The study warns that "with carbon trading set to become the next 'big thing' in the financial world, strict regulation of the carbon trading industry, including accreditation and monitoring of carbon offset providers, is seen as necessary to avoid scams and corruption becoming established in this industry lured by huge potential profits, and to ensure that offsets are real and effective."

Clean coal technology (CCT) is also creating some optimism that a balance can be achieved between reducing greenhouse gases and continuing to exploit vast coal reserves to supply industry with cost-efficient power. However, environmental groups and some commentators are cynical, pointing out that the technology is still unproven and also noting that Victoria's brown coal industry, labelled one of the 'dirtiest' in the world in terms of its contribution to greenhouse emissions, has not signed up to the Australian Coal Association's \$1 billion voluntary scheme to develop CCT.

The analysis warned that companies and industries are under pressure to become cleaner and greener and face widespread criticism if they do not implement meaningful measures to reduce carbon emissions. Environmental performance is likely to increasingly be a key driver of reputation, it says. The report also concluded that companies adopting policies and planning measures to address climate change need to set and achieve significant measurable targets. "Broad unspecific policies and 'aspirational goals' are not going to cut it and may backfire leading to public criticism. There are signs of this already happening", the report warns.

Australia and China are the subject of most attacks for lack of responsibility in addressing global warming. Australia is criticised, particularly in blogs, for being the world's largest exporter of coal and uranium and not taking enough responsibility for downstream effects of its products or showing leadership in addressing global warming. China is being widely criticised for its escalating greenhouse emissions driven by rapid industrialisation. China released its first plan on climate change in June 2007 and claims it is addressing its environmental footprint. However, the Chinese Government has issued statements arguing that "sustainable development and poverty reduction" must remain a focus.

The analysis, undertaken by the research unit of Media Monitors, reviewed more than 1,500 news reports, features articles, columns, letters to the editor and radio and TV program segments and 170 blogs discussing energy over a three months period between 1 May and 30 July 2007.

Group Research Director of Media Monitors, Dr Jim Macnamara, pointed out that the study was not an examination of the media, but used mainstream and citizen media as a site to collect and examine statements, announcements and debate by spokespersons from government, organisations, companies and commentators – both expert and from the general public. "Systematic analysis of statements and discussion in various media provides a way of identifying both official views and what is termed 'buzz'," Dr Macnamara said.

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Further information:

The report is available at www.mediamonitors.com.au or www.carmaapac.com

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