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## OPINION

## The Coles catalogue debate is a reminder: Adland needs a greenwashing education

*This week, Coles announced it was axing print catalogues. In response, The Real Media Collective claimed print catalogues are more environmentally friendly than their digital counterparts. But does that actually ring true? Christopher Sewell investigates.*

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by **CHRISTOPHER SEWELL**



This week, Mumbrella ran an article headlined: “**‘Disingenuous’ Coles slammed by industry body after ceasing catalogue delivery**”. It covered The Real Media Collective’s (TRMC) response to Coles’ announcement they would be terminating printed catalogues in favour of digital formats and printed point of sale copies.

And it was a prime example of why the industry needs an education in calculating carbon pollution contribution. But more importantly, why we need to be hypervigilant around greenwashing.

The comment thread was even more enlightening for its general lack of understanding about the prescribed methodology for calculating carbon pollution contribution and the ways it can and should be presented.



Coles' digital catalogue

TRMC CEO Kellie Northwood was reported as stating: “For every Coles customer spending 60 seconds browsing a digital catalogue, they will emit 12g of CO<sub>2</sub> compared to looking at a printed catalogue for a day and only emitting 0.5g of CO<sub>2</sub> [according to Climate Care].”

So, we have the classic stand-off between two parties.

Both TRMC and Coles have a vested interest in their version winning the PR battle. Coles want to be seen as environmentally aware. Then the TRMC counter with a hypothetical comparison figure to ‘prove’ that printing is in fact a better method of communication when measuring carbon.

To mediate this dispute, we need to make some assumptions and draw some potential boundaries to answer the question: ‘Is a print or digital catalogue better for the environment?’ It is important that we are comparing like with like.

In each of these processes, there are a number of stages for consideration: design and file creation, printing (for the print version only), storage, distribution and disposal.

First, design and file creation. The same amount of carbon is produced in the production or creation of the file for both printing and online.

Second, for the printed version only, there is the printing. The figure of 0.5g of CO<sub>2</sub> per catalogue could be accurate, but it would depend on the number of pages. I used the industry leading CO<sub>2</sub> counter to check this figure, and called it 12-pages at A4. I got at least double the emissions quoted by the TRMC. But it is important to note that the CO<sub>2</sub> counter methodology does include disposal of the catalogue once it has been read for the day, so this is likely to contribute to some of the difference.

Third is storage. This is either storage in warehousing, in the case of the printed catalogue, or storage on a server, in the case of the electronic file. The assumption is that the printed version is only stored briefly, as it will need to get into letterboxes in a hurry, while the online file could be around for a long time. So we can assume that the online channel has a higher carbon emission footprint for storage.

Next is distribution. This is an important one. Not just in terms of the method of distribution, but the efficiency. The printed catalogue is distributed by transport methods that use fossil fuel such as diesel or petroleum. The CO<sub>2</sub> impact is calculated by weight, mode of transport, and distance. Therefore, the distance and weight of the printed catalogues from the print plant to the distribution centres to the points of local delivery must be factored in.

Finally, a file sitting on a server distributed by email, mobile phone app



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...that, in the digital age, the carbon footprint of a catalog is not just the paper, ink or html webpage, also has distribution carbon costs. What is true, in TRMC's defence, is that 'consuming' the same catalogue online does have a high carbon footprint. The electricity that the servers, network and the viewing devices use needs to be calculated and factored into the overall carbon pollution contribution too. It also does not go away after a day, as that file will remain on an energy-hungry server for potentially years. This is counterintuitive and quite complex. If you want to go into this more deeply, have a look at the [research TrinityP3 conducted back at the end of 2017](#) about the environmental impact of Facebook (or any online) advertising.

But more important is the efficiency of that distribution. This is a question of waste. How targeted is each of the modes of distribution? In the case of the mass letterbox drop, how many of those catalogues become instant landfill or sent immediately for recycling? Likewise, is the electronic version distributed in the same mass, un-targeted way? Or is the electronic version based on opting in through email, app and website visitations?

Looking at the 'junk' litter spilling from many letterboxes around the suburbs, it is clear that mass, un-targeted distribution is incredibly, visibly wasteful. If half of the printed catalogues are discarded, then that effectively doubles the carbon pollution of this mode. But if the electronic distribution is based on opt-in, this reduces waste.

Besides, the fact that Coles has run both printed and electronic catalogues side-by-side for several years means they will have a very good view of the efficacy of each stream. Dropping one of them will therefore save time and contribute to lowering carbon pollution – no calculations of carbon pollution contribution required.



Christopher Sewell is environmental business director at TrinityP3 and CEO of The Gaia Partnership

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