

“It is Five Minutes to Midnight and all is Quiet”:

Corporate Rhetoric and Sustainability

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Bio:

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The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century. Many corporations publish non-financial reports talking about how they meet this challenge, while simultaneously declaring that their operations *are* sustainable. If one accepts the science saying that humans have caused the observed climate change in the world (IPCC, 2013), it becomes a paradox that so many corporations declare that their operations are sustainable (Ihlen & Roper, 2014; Milne, 2012). Seen against the escalation of the climate problem, this paradox is all the more glaring. As the chief of the UN’s IPCC has stated in interviews, “we have five minutes before midnight” (RTCC, 2013).

Two questions are discussed in this essay: first, what rhetorical strategies do corporations use with regard to sustainability? A short summary of the literature on corporate sustainability rhetoric is presented, and this research is updated with a brief analysis of the top corporations’ non-financial reports for 2012. Second, what implications do the so-called communicative constitution of organizations (CCO)-perspective (e.g., Putnam & Nicotera, 2008) have for criticism of this type of rhetoric? The latter holds that ambitious corporate sustainability rhetoric helps drive the sustainability agenda.

“All is Quiet”

Originating in the field of ecology, sustainability can be defined as “the ability of the whole or parts of a biotic community to extend its form into the future” (Ariansen, 1999, p. 84). Transferred to society, there are strong and weak forms of sustainability. The former places natural resources first and requires a radical transformation of the economic system, while the latter opts to solve environmental problems within the bounds of the present system and moderate reforms. The growth paradigm is not challenged (Hajer, 1995; Redclift, 2005). Previous studies have showed how corporations typically favor forms of weak sustainability (Springett, 2003; Tregidga, Kearins, & Milne, 2013). Corporations tend to put themselves at

the center; it is the survival of the corporation that is seen as most important. Corporations rely on eco-modernism where, in short, the status quo is maintained through minor changes and a trust in technological solutions (Hajer, 1995; Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005).

In general, it has been claimed that corporations have unclear strategies in their pursuit for sustainability (Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010). This also becomes evident looking more closely at the sustainability rhetoric that often relies on the *balance* metaphor (Ihlen & Roper, 2014; Tregidga et al, 2013). Balance can be described as a term of ultimate good that few would argue against. The metaphor is typically understood as the act of weighing profit against environmental concerns and it does seem to involve a dimension of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984; Leitch & Davenport, 2007). The metaphor is sufficiently vague so that it can describe a range of different relationships between profit and environmental concerns. When are these entities in balance? The problem is, really, that they cannot be meaningfully when compared on similar scales (Ihlen & Roper, 2014).

Another important trait of the corporate sustainability rhetoric is the move from a journey metaphor to the argument that sustainability has already been achieved (Ihlen & Roper, 2014; Milne, 2012). Previously, corporations would argue that they were “doing” sustainability and that they were moving, which, incidentally, made it “unfair” to criticize them (Milne, Kearins, & Walton, 2006; Milne, Tregidga, & Walton, 2009). Later research has shown, however, that many corporations present the claim that their operations *are* sustainable. This claim of actually being sustainable has often been bolstered by strategic and self-interested definitions of what sustainability is. Corporations have, for instance, argued that they *strive* for sustainability, hence they are sustainable (Ihlen, 2009b). Indeed, some corporations indicate that they have been sustainable since their very inception (Ihlen & Roper, 2014). The topos of ethical heritage has been recognized in the wider corporate social responsibility discourse as well as a way of strengthening legitimacy and reputation (e.g.,

Blombäck & Scandeliuss, 2013).

In the next section, the findings above are supplemented with a brief analysis of current rhetorical practice.

“Paradise in Heaven Part II”

In 2013, 76 of the 100 top corporations on the Fortune Global-list (Fortune Magazine, 2013) published standalone non-financial reports. All these reports used the phrase ‘sustainability’, and 26 of them had the term as the key word in their title. A brief qualitative analysis identified six traits of the rhetoric in this material.

First, the definitions of sustainability are few and far between. Quite a few of the corporations (e.g., Daimler, 2013; Ford, 2013; Telefonica, 2013; Volkswagen, 2013) resort to indirect definitions, mentioning how they aim to balance economic/financial, social and environmental aspects. For BASF, for instance, it is about “even balance” between these elements (2013, p. 4). As pointed out, this metaphor is strikingly vague. Does it refer to the ability to maintain the center of gravity, or does it refer to how weighing pans bring a beam to a horizontal position? It is left to the corporations to decide how much attention should be paid to environmental concerns at the expense of economic profit. The balance metaphor can be stretched in many directions (Ihlen & Roper, 2014).

Second, a relationship topos is present through the way that corporations opt to write about sustainability *themes*, rather than definitions. They point to, for instance, cutting CO₂-emissions (ArcelorMittal, 2013) and investments in renewable energy (Allianz, 2013). Indeed, all the corporations define environmental challenges and activities as integral to sustainability. The term itself, however, is treated as self-explaining, much like the GM Vice President of Sustainability and Global Regulatory Affairs says: “anyone who has an appreciation for sustainability understands that it’s about conservation and efficient use of resources” (GM, 2013, p. 4).

Third, several instances of corporate centric views are found. Banco Santander talks about prioritizing this way: “the first thing that needs to be sustainable is one’s own business; it is necessary to have a solid business model geared to generating recurring and stable revenues” (2013, p. 4).

Fourth, the corporations often attempt to reframe sustainability as something that will contribute to business success (Ihlen, 2009a). GM summarizes its sustainability strategy “in two words: business value” (GM, 2013, p. 23). Working with sustainability can provide “revenue opportunities, cost savings and risk mitigation” (GM, 2013, p. 1).

Fifth, an eco-modernist view is mirrored in statements like this from P&G: “we believe most of the sustainability challenges the world faces can be solved with innovation, and that this innovation can have a positive business impact” (P&G, 2013, p. 24).

Sixth, like previous findings have indicated (Ihlen & Roper, 2014; Tregidga et al., 2013), many corporations talk about their long-standing tradition for sustainability. Siemens, for instance, argues that sustainability is “a business opportunity that drives economic, environmental and social progress has dominated our strategy and activities for 165 years” (Siemens, 2013, p. 4). Similarly, E.ON, sees sustainability as “integral to our corporate strategy and embedded in our operating business” (E.ON, 2013).

It is particularly this latter trait of the sustainability rhetoric that is of interest when discussing the CCO-perspective, something that is done in the next section.

A “Get out of Jail”-Card?

Building on the notion that talk is action, attention has been called to the performative function of rhetoric. In, for instance, writing about communication and corporate social responsibility (CSR), a former industry vice president put it this way: “if you are sufficiently brave or cheeky to communicate a few inches ahead of the actual state of affairs, as a CSR professional you can help to assure that reality follows suit. If visionary leaders hadn’t had

the nerve to dream and talk ahead of reality, many important innovations would not have occurred” (Lunheim, 2005, p. 6). Similar arguments are being made for the legitimacy of “aspirational talk.” Leaders should not only “walk the talk,” but “talk the walk” (Christensen, 2007). Concerning environmental rhetoric, it has been pointed out that it has helped transform corporations’ understanding and conduct (Livesey, 2002). Regarding CSR communication, scholars have argued that such communication can create a “creeping” commitment for CSR (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2011).

While these arguments seem compelling, there are, of course, no guaranteed causal links between CSR reporting and other CSR activities (e.g., Ditlev-Simonsen, 2010). One example shows how an airline proclaimed to minimize its carbon footprint, while at the same time, increasing it by 25 percent (Milne & Grubnic, 2011). How long should the public wait for this airline to come through regarding its carbon footprint claims? How long does it take before the “creeping commitment” sets in? It could be pointed out that corporate environmental reporting emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Milne, 2012). By now, corporations should have had a good chance to make the world more sustainable by following through on their claims.

While embracing the centrality of rhetoric and the position that it can have on a performative function, it seems important to keep up the discussion and critique of what understanding of sustainability corporations subscribe to, and what aspects of sustainability they draw attention to. The tendency to treat sustainability as something given is problematic, since the term is highly contested and involves important dilemmas. Particularly, the claim to already be sustainable inhibits more radical changes to a system that is not sustainable in an ecological sense. While the ecological definition of sustainability has long-term persevering of the ecological system as its horizon, the corporate definition is corporate-centric, seeing survival of the corporation as the prime goal.

Conclusion

The advice Milne (2012) gives to corporations is to forget about sustainability, and instead seek to provide *accountability* on matters such as social and environmental accounts. That would be one way of steering clear of the dilemma of not being able to reach the goal, anyway. Then again, one might ask, is it possible to envision other or additional ways of coping with the challenge? The position taken in this essay is that a first step is to acknowledge the need to move beyond the insistence that no dilemma exists between meeting business goals and achieving sustainability. Aspirational talk will not dissolve this discrepancy.

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