The Oxymoron of ‘Sustainable Oil Production’: The Case of the Norwegian Oil Industry

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Keywords: Sustainable development, climate change, oil industry, communication strategies.
Abstract

Many oil companies have adopted the concept of sustainable development and claim that their production is sustainable. This might seem odd given that the oil industry depletes a non-renewable resource and that oil production also contributes to climate change. This paper analyses how the industry attempts to resolve this paradox, using the Norwegian oil industry as a case study. It is demonstrated how four rhetorical operations are used. By employing the topic of definition, the industry argues that it is sustainable because it (1) strives to cut its emissions and (2) manages oil resources with a long-term perspective until such time as technology will provide solutions. The industry then uses the topic of comparison to (3) discredit other energy sources as ‘unrealistic’ options and (4) compare the production in Norway with more polluting oil production elsewhere. Understanding this type of rhetoric is crucial for validating or criticising the sustainability claims of the industry.
Introduction

The issue of climate change and the subsequent development of international climate agreements have posed a challenge to the world’s oil companies, as the production and use of their main product is a major source of carbon emissions. Several studies have focused on how the oil industry has dealt with this challenge (e.g., Estrada et al., 1997; Ketola, 1996, in press; Kolk & Levy, 2001; Le Menestrel et al., 2002; Levy & Kolk, 2002; Livesey, 2002a, 2002b; Rowlands, 2000; Skjærseth, 2005; Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2001; Skodvin & Skjærseth, 2001; van de Wateringen, 2005). One industry response has been to declare support for the notion of sustainable development. En route, many of the companies have also claimed that their oil production is sustainable since they balance economic, social and environmental responsibilities.

Despite the attention that is given to the climate strategies of oil companies, surprisingly little analysis has been carried out on exactly how they attempt to overcome and rationalise the paradox that is inherent in their sustainability claim. After all, the companies deplete a non-renewable resource, and their production is a major source of carbon emissions. The research question of this essay is, thus: How does the oil industry argue that its production is sustainable? The Norwegian oil industry is chosen as a case study, and a rhetorical analysis is carried out of the industry’s strategies.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section contains a literature review, and the research framework and methodology is then presented. This is followed by an empirical analysis that demonstrates the rhetorical operations that are employed by the Norwegian oil industry. Finally, the conclusion discusses the findings and gives suggestions for further research.
Literature Review: The Concept of Sustainable Development

The general literature on sustainable development is first discussed in this section, and then a short overview of the studies on how the oil industry has used the concept is given.

Definitions and Development

It is largely agreed that it was the United Nations report, *Our Common Future*, that introduced the notion of sustainable development to a wider audience. The report defines the concept as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on the Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Broadly speaking then, sustainable development attempts to combine growing concerns about environmental issues with socio-economic issues (Hopwood *et al.*, 2005). The idea has since been given different treatment by scholars in a wide range of fields, including management, political science, sociology, economics, philosophy, business ethics and rhetoric (e.g., Bragd *et al.*, 1998; Castro, 2004; Delyse, 2005; Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Fergus & Rowny, 2005a, 2005b; Fowler & Hope, in press; Hajer, 1995; Lafferty & Langhelle, 1999b; Peterson, 1997; Sharma & Ruud, 2003; Springett, 2003; Stubbs & Cockline, in press; Welford, 1997; Young & Tilley, in press). In the literature review that was conducted by Bill Hopwood *et al.* (2005), the approaches were classified in three broad categories: those supporting the status quo or minor adjustments to it, those seeking reform and those advocating a more fundamental transformation of how humans interrelate and relate to the environment. These approaches usually correspond to the already existing political and philosophical outlooks of their proponents.
The sustainable development concept is clearly normative, and, as can be expected, its implications and goals are widely debated. The word ‘sustainable’, however, is not normative and seems reasonably clear. Sustainability, which stems from the science of ecology, ‘designates the ability of the whole or parts of a biotic community to extend its form into the future’ (Ariansen, 1999, p. 84). Sustainability can relate to a single resource, an ecosystem or a broader social context. Although this understanding is relatively common, no similar agreement can be found regarding the term ‘development’ and its related material and moral goals. Much debate has evolved around the so-called rights-based approach and environmental justice (Redclift, 2005). It has been argued that sustainable development should relate to space (national/global) and time (current generation/future generation) dimensions and that equity is a crucial value in this respect (Lafferty & Langhelle, 1999a). With regard to the time dimension, it must be asked whether we are saving irreplaceable resources for the next generation, whether they will have use for these resources and whether we are creating damage that will affect them (Ariansen, 1999).

During the 1990s, the so-called business case for sustainable development and the term ‘eco-efficiency’ were touted frequently within the field of environmental management. Eco-efficiency implies that businesses seek win-win solutions and that their environmental and economic goals strengthen each other. Lately, however, environmental management has arrived at the idea of eco-effectiveness. Here, it is argued that business practices should go further and attempt to restore and enhance the environment (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Young & Tilley, in press). This idea points to the argument that a business cannot manage only its economic capital to be economically sustainable, but, rather, that a ‘truly’ sustainable corporation must meet the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness in relation to the environment and to
society. It must be ecologically and socially sustainable, too. Whereas the latter notion refers to how a company adds value to communities and maintains legitimacy, ecologically sustainable companies can be defined this way:

Ecologically sustainable companies use only natural resources that are consumed at a rate below the natural reproduction, or at a rate below the development of substitutes. They do not cause emissions that accumulate in the environment at a rate beyond the capacity of the natural system to absorb and assimilate these emissions. Finally they do not engage in activity that degrades eco-system services (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002, p. 133).

This gives a framework to evaluate a company according to the economic, social and environmental aspects of its activities, which goes beyond the now usual triple-bottom-line approach that is often used to operationalise sustainable development (see Elkington, 2004; Henriques & Richardson, 2004).

Some are sceptical of the concept of sustainable development. It is a common accusation that the phrase often simply means business as usual (Feller, 2004; Springett, 2003; Utting, 2002). A German study, for instance, showed that a third of the companies that supported the notion used hardly any specific operative measures to implement sustainability (Hahn & Scheermesser, 2006).

Others have argued that the concept itself – and the ensuing debate – has led to less diversity of perspectives, marginalised ecological sustainability, privileged an ethics of finance and turned environmental issues into technological matters, thus avoiding the need to make choices (Castro, 2004; Fergus & Rowny, 2005b; Hajer, 1995; Peterson, 1997; Tokar, 1997). In sum, it has been charged that the original concept has simply been hijacked by the corporate world. Businesses typically define sustainability in their own terms to further their own interests. The result is often that
no change is effected (Mayhew, 1997; Welford, 1997).

*The Oil Industry and Sustainable Development*

Some studies of the ‘greening of business’ have concluded that it is not care for the environment as such that is the driving force, but rather pressure from politicians, the mass media, NGOs and consumers. ‘Going green’ makes sense for a company because it brings more business, saves costs and improves its reputation (Saha & Darnton, 2005). Similar findings pertain to the oil industry and its climate strategies. It has been demonstrated that a company’s home base seems to be the most important factor. The Netherlands-based company, Shell, for instance, has felt social pressure to adopt a proactive stance towards climate change, whereas its US counterpart, ExxonMobil, has been able to choose a reactive strategy (Skjærseth, 2005; Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2001). A study of Exxon and BP Amoco pointed to the importance of nationality, the companies’ respective interests and their management structures in their choices of different strategies (Rowlands, 2000).

Nonetheless, a great majority of the world’s oil companies do include environmental values in their codes and policies, and there is a tendency for environmental management to turn from an operational to a strategic issue (van de Wateringen, 2005). In an analysis that compared the environmental values, visions, business environments, general strategic management and environmental policies of the largest oil companies, it was argued that the companies were indeed making progress towards sustainable development (Ketola, in press). Still, the problem for the companies, it was argued, was that their business environments were moving more quickly. The companies were still characterised by techno-centrism, but, as the author commented, the sustainable development of oil companies has not saved us. When the
oil companies do not want to change their behaviour, they say that they are balancing their economic, social and environmental responsibilities. However, it is still economic responsibility that is given prime value (Ketola, in press).

The latter finding has also been demonstrated in a study of Shell’s discourse on sustainable development. Here it was argued that ‘Shell’s emphasis on the free-market system and the necessity of profit, its generally negative view of regulation and its construction of business as apolitical showed the company’s adherence to certain taken-for-granted assumptions of traditional economics’ (Livesey, 2002b, p. 331). Similarly, Exxon’s discourse on sustainable development downplayed environmental and social concerns and characterised them as irrational, political or radical (Livesey, 2002a).

In sum, it has been demonstrated that a techno-centric and scientific-economic paradigm dictates the discourse on sustainable development among oil companies and that the status quo approach prevails.

**Research Framework and Methodology**

This essay will analyse the sustainability claims of the oil industry in light of the theoretical discussion in the previous section and relate this to a focus on the industry’s *rhetoric* – its means of persuasion. Of particular interest are the logical proofs that the industry uses and the ways its arguments are constructed. The analysis will concentrate on the ancient notions of *logos*, logical proofs and *topics*, which are defined as a stock of general lines of argument, such as comparisons or relationships (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

A case study of the Norwegian oil industry was conducted. Norway is the world’s third largest oil exporter and is an interesting case because the nation’s
economy is highly reliant on oil production. In 2004, the petroleum industry accounted for 21 per cent of national value creation (Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2005). The case is also of particular interest because Norway has sought to become a leader in attempts to establish an international climate agreement, and there is widespread support for sustainable development (Andresen & Butenschøn, 2001).

In addition to the case study approach, a combination of two different methods was used: qualitative interviews and textual analysis of public industry documents. This provided both officially sanctioned accounts and glimpses of how industry representatives talk about the issue informally. The triangulation of methods was also valuable because, for instance, certain questions that arose from the analysis of the documents could then be addressed in the interviews.

Twenty-four oil companies share 251 operating licenses on the Norwegian Continental Shelf. Here it is concentrated on the two, by far, largest companies, Statoil and Hydro, that have 77 and 53 operating licenses, respectively (Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2005). A textual analysis of Statoil’s ‘sustainability report’ for 2004 (Statoil, 2005) was conducted, as was the transcript of a speech on sustainability that was given by a former Statoil CEO (Fjell, 2002). As for Hydro, the company’s climate policy document and its 2004 report on corporate social responsibility (CSR) were analysed (Hydro, 2004a, 2004b). All of the texts are in English and can be obtained from the respective websites of the companies (www.statoil.com and www.hydro.com).

The following representatives of the companies were interviewed: Statoil’s vice president of media relations (28 November 2005); Statoil’s senior vice president for the environment (19 October 2005); and Hydro’s senior vice president of media relations (3 November 2005).
To also secure representation of industry-wide perspectives, qualitative interviews were carried out with representatives of the Norwegian Oil Industry Association (the OLF) and the so-called Reputation Forum of a joint industry/authorities project called Kon-Kraft. The following representatives of these bodies were interviewed: special advisor and former director of communications of the OLF (29 December 2005); an OLF communications advisor (1 November 2005); and the leader of the Reputation Forum (12 October 2005). The quotations from the interviews that are used were translated from Norwegian into English by the author. All of the interviews were taped, transcribed and submitted to each interviewee for approval.

A case study approach such as this has several limitations. First, it is not possible to generalise the Norwegian findings to the oil industry in other countries in which other conditions may apply and influence the rhetoric. Second, it is difficult to state that the perspectives of the entire Norwegian oil industry are captured in the analysis. The best way to respond to these validity challenges is probably to be careful not to overstate the findings.

**Empirical Analysis: The Norwegian Oil Industry and Sustainable Development**

As pointed out in the literature review, the social and political context is an important factor in understanding the strategies of oil companies. In Norway, it does seem that the political situation has ‘demanded’ support for sustainable development, as there has been a strong link between the *Our Common Future* report (often named after the committee leader, then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland) and official Norwegian policy (Langhelle, 2000). As will be shown, the oil industry argues that the current system of oil production is sustainable. Four justification
strategies, which draw on the topics of definition and comparison, are used.

Definition I: Sustainability Means Cutting Emissions

Statoil’s 2004 sustainability report states that ‘the core of the sustainable development concept is the principle that this generation has a responsibility to ensure that our descendants inherit the same opportunities we have enjoyed’ (Statoil ASA, 2005, p. 3). This echoes the UN report, Our Common Future. Statoil has, in fact, set itself the ambitious goal of causing zero harm to people and the environment. The company wants to ‘minimize the unfortunate consequences of our business. One way in which we are doing this is to work systematically to reduce emissions to the air and discharges to the sea’ (Statoil ASA, 2005, p. 4). Hydro, too, points to its own emissions reductions and ‘development of sustainable systems’ (Hydro, 2004b, p. 2).

Here, the companies use the topic of definition (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Corbett & Connors, 1999) to frame the issue of sustainable development. The logic at work is based on the following, deconstructed, syllogism. ‘All companies that strive to cut emissions are sustainable’ (major premise). ‘Company X strives to cut emissions’ (minor premise). Thus, the conclusion is, ‘Company X is a sustainable company’.

Although the validity of this reasoning might be sound, it is the truth-value of the major premise that is in question. In the literature review, it was mentioned that one approach to sustainable development argues that companies should not undermine the possibilities of future generations to attain similar or improved living and equity standards (Lafferty & Meadowcroft, 2000). This approach certainly calls for a reduction in emissions to avoid damage to the coming generations, as stated by a clear majority of climate scientists (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001). However, the issue can easily turn into a question of scale: how much of a reduction
is needed to earn the label ‘sustainable’? Following the logic that is implied by Statoil and Hydro, a one per cent cut in emissions would qualify. However, looking at the strict definition of an ecologically sustainable company that was presented by Dyllick and Hockerts, it seems clear that the oil companies do not meet the criteria, as they cause ‘emissions that accumulate in the environment at a rate beyond the capacity of the natural system to absorb and assimilate’ them (2002, p. 133).

The debate on emissions cuts easily leads to a focus on technology. The empirical material clearly indicates that the techno-centric environmental values that dominate the international oil industry (Ketola, 1996, in press) are manifest in the Norwegian oil industry too. This is hardly surprising, given the strong engineering culture of the industry. Still, even the former communications director of the OLF, a philosopher by training, expresses a similar view. She sees no contradiction between sustainability and oil production: the point is that oil production should be made as clean as possible.

Of course you can work sustainably with oil and gas too . . . It is a fact that oil is a lot more polluting than wind [power]. But a sustainable method [of producing] oil and gas is to use the knowledge we have to make the production as clean as possible, and I would deem this sustainable . . . Sustainability is not something that wind and solar energy have a monopoly on.

Again, the implication is that as long as you strive to reach an ideal and use the best available technology, this is sufficient for you to be labelled, in this case, sustainable. Until emissions are more or less completely removed, however, it is fair to say that this understanding of sustainability is not in line with perspectives that emphasise the need for reform or transformation or the idea that companies should be
ecologically sustainable (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Hopwood et al., 2005).

Apart from cutting their own emissions through, for instance, the development of new technology, the companies also express support for emissions trading and other similar flexible mechanisms (see Pinkse, in press). In its 2004 sustainability report, the CEO of Statoil writes that the company believes ‘that this will be the most effective way for industry to help cut the global release of greenhouse gases’ (Statoil ASA, 2005, p. 4). Hydro too embraces the approach of ‘cost effective solutions’ and talks about the ‘innovative powers of business’ that governments can release through designing ‘equitable, global frameworks’ (Hydro, 2004b, p. 2). This is an example of the so-called ‘international approach’ that became dominant in Norwegian climate politics in the 1990s. It is also an approach that is feared by some environmentalists because it moves the climate debate into a technical-economic sphere in which it will be difficult to mobilise people for the domestic cuts that the environmentalists feel are needed (Ihlen, 2006). Other implications of the ‘international approach’ are discussed in a later section.

**Definition II: Sustainability Means Long-Term Management**

The Norwegian oil industry argues that, although oil is a non-renewable resource, the industry is still sustainable. Again, several arguments that draw on the topic of definition (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Corbett & Connors, 1999) are put forward to make this case. Statoil’s vice president of media relations, for instance, tries to link sustainability to local environmental aspects and the relationship to other industries:

We do recognise that the oil and gas resources will not last forever, but the important point is that when you have started operating in a field, you have to produce in such a way that it will not have negative effects for other industries
. . . or the environment the day you have to shut down the field.

This is clearly an argument that seeks to shift the focus by reframing the debate to discuss other (important) environmental issues and issues that can be dealt with technologically. Also related to technological optimism is the more aggressive strategy of asking whether we can be sure that future generations will need oil and gas. A Hydro manager argues that it is more likely that new forms of energy will dominate in the future and that this means that oil production is sustainable ‘in the larger picture’.

Everyone knows that the Stone Age did not end because we ran out of stones, and the coal age did not end because the coal reserves were exhausted. Most people do not believe that the oil age will end because we run out of oil, but because we find something better . . . But we do believe that, in total, we are quite sustainable because the resources, no matter how you define it, have to be replaced by something else as an energy carrier.

Other representatives also share this technological environmental vision and want to distinguish between sustainability now and sustainability in the future. The leader of Kon Kraft’s Reputation Forum, for instance, argues that the industry is sustainable in the short term because it will find new resources to replace those that are used.

From the perspective of 500 years, perhaps a thousand years, [the use of fossil fuels] will, perhaps, not be sustainable. But in the period in which it happens, it will be sustainable because you find new resources; you are able to replace the reserves that you produce. I would say [the system] is sustainable today.

These definitions of sustainability do draw on an ecological understanding of how a system is able to extend its form into the future (Ariansen, 1999). However, the
industry logic is similar to the reasoning regarding emission cuts. A question of scale has to be settled. Is a sustainable system everlasting, or is it a system that can sustain itself for a shorter, more specific time period? Again, however, given the strict definition of an ecologically sustainable company that was posed by Dyllick and Hockerts (2002), the oil companies fall short because they use natural resources at a rate that is below natural reproduction and above the rate of the development of substitutes.

The ‘practical’ solution that is suggested by the industry representatives is that the resource be managed with a ‘sound’ and long-term perspective until such time as technology can solve the problem. The senior vice president of media relations at Hydro puts it this way:

Sustainability does, in practice, mean that you should conduct reasonable and sound resource management and care for the environment. And this implies that you should preferably not deplete scarce resources or should at least contribute to make the resource access long term and renewable.

However, no further explanation was given for how this could be achieved, apart from the rather self-explanatory point of not using all of the resources at once.

The former communications director of the OLF is eager to emphasise that oil and gas are, after all, natural products. Pointing this out, she also argues that natural products have been harvested ‘as long as mankind has populated the earth and lived in harmony with the environment’. The use of the terms ‘natural products’, ‘harvest’ and ‘harmony’ is interesting, as it glosses over the differences, the fact that these natural products are not renewable and that the ‘harvest’ of them is very far from creating anything that resembles environmental harmony. In sum, it must be asked whether depleting a non-renewable source can be viewed in isolation from the equity issue of
the effects of pollution on future generations (Ariansen, 1999; Lafferty & Langhelle, 1999a).

**Comparison I: Other Energy Sources are Not Realistic Alternatives**

When discussing alternative energy forms, the oil industry relies on two basic premises: energy is a necessity, and energy demand is increasing. The problem then is how this demand should be met, and, here, the oil industry uses a topic of comparison whereby the rhetor compares two or more things according to their similarity or difference, superiority or inferiority (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Corbett & Connors, 1999): which energy source is currently available, and which are still the ‘unrealistic’ alternatives? The oil industry argues that there are no ‘proper’ alternatives to fossil fuels. The former communications director of the OLF believes that the critics lack ‘a sense of reality’ when they accuse the oil industry of contributing to climate change:

There you have the [lack of a] sense of reality again. … It must be much better … that the oil industry is challenged and stimulated to provide as clean a product as possible instead of saying ‘we want wind’… when there is no possibility of providing enough wind energy to meet the energy demand. You can sit on your high horse and say that wind [energy] is better. But if it is not possible to get enough quantities [of energy] from this resource ... it must be better that the oil industry makes some small steps to be cleaner. Small steps [in this industry] make a huge difference.

This sentiment echoes the environmental vision of most of the international oil companies. Although alternative sources are seen as playing a part in the future, the implication is that non-renewable energy forms will remain prevalent (Ketola, in press). Some oil companies have attempted to reposition themselves as *energy*
companies. BP, for instance, is using the phrase ‘beyond petroleum’ (Beder, 2002). Statoil, too, calls itself an ‘energy company’ and has projects that look at alternative energy forms, such as bio diesel. Nonetheless, as the energy reserves on the Norwegian Continental Shelf are estimated to last for many more years yet, the Norwegian companies say that their core business will be in oil and gas for the foreseeable future. As expressed by the CEO of Statoil:

> It would be unrealistic to imagine a development over the next 30-40 years where oil and gas no longer served as the dominant energy bearers . . . We do not believe that the answer lies in rapidly phasing out fossil fuels in favour of renewable energy. Instead, we would urge an open exchange of views and are sceptical of all dogmatic standpoints relating to energy, the environment or sustainability (Statoil ASA, 2005, pp. 3-4).

Here, the oil industry’s rhetoric expresses a desire for hegemonic discursive control by highlighting certain aspects and downplaying others (Livesey, 2002b). Some perspectives are seen as ‘dogmatic’, whereas others are seen as sound. No attempts are made to qualify why alternative sources are an ‘unrealistic’ alternative or why the rapid phasing out of fossil fuels should not take place. However, it does not seem that the political situation calls for such justifications. As has already been mentioned, petroleum production is vital to the Norwegian economy, and a clear political majority has also agreed to the expansion of oil production (Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2002). It has long been argued that the existence of petroleum in Norway has slowed down and hindered advances in the development of alternative energy forms (Sejersted, 1999). In other words, it is the status quo approach to sustainable development (Hopwood et al., 2005) that prevails.
Comparison II: Norwegian Production is Relatively Clean

The topic of comparison (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Corbett & Connors, 1999) is explicitly used when the Norwegian oil industry argues that it is more environmentally friendly than the oil industry elsewhere. This premise is not only used to establish the industry’s sustainability credentials but is also used in a more aggressive push to justify increased Norwegian production. For instance, Statoil’s senior vice president for the environment claims that emissions of climate-changing gases ‘represent a challenge, but at the same time, here in Norway we have something to be proud of in relation to this issue’. A former CEO of Statoil provides some specific statistics:

- The Norwegian petroleum industry is among the most energy efficient in the world. According to the International Association of Oil and Gas Producers (OGP), the industry’s global average of carbon dioxide emissions is currently about 16 kilograms per barrel of oil equivalent produced. The [Norwegian Petroleum Directorate] estimates that the corresponding figure for the [Norwegian Continental Shelf] is just over six kilograms. On some of our new developments, emissions are as low as 2.4 kilograms (Fjell, 2002).

Here, then, is another example of what has been pointed out as a business’s attempts to gain an advantage in a competitive system. The ecological crisis can actually be turned into a competitive advantage from a commercial perspective (Livesey, 2002b). A communications advisor in the OLF argues that the comparison should be made more frequently and that the oil industry should also position itself against coal:

- We export a lot of the energy we produce and offer, in our eyes and from a
global perspective, a clean energy alternative in comparison to other alternatives that exist. … I believe that the biggest challenge for the industry is to get this point across – that we actually offer a relatively clean energy alternative . . . compared to, for instance, using coal reserves.

This is in keeping with the aforementioned reorientation of Norwegian climate politics to emphasise an ‘international approach’. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Ihlen, 2006), similar reasoning has been used to argue for the building of gas-fired power plants in Norway. Although domestic emissions would increase, it has been argued that the export of power from these plants would replace power from more polluting sources and thus lead to a global reduction of emissions. However, this reasoning is problematic, because it presupposes rational or precise motives for choosing energy carriers. An international climate agreement may push countries towards choosing cleaner energy sources, but countries may still have motives for choosing a particular type of energy that are rooted in their perceived security needs, or they may have other psychological and economic motives (Eldegard, 1995). The export of power could also contribute to an increase in total energy consumption and be an addition rather than a replacement. Furthermore, the comparison rests on a specific selection of energy sources. Instead of positioning oil production against renewable sources, such as solar power, it is compared to other fossil fuels. This rhetoric has, nonetheless, been successful in a country that relies so heavily on income from oil.

Conclusions

Scholars have argued that the concept of sustainable development needs more clarity of meaning (Hopwood et al., 2005). This paper has discussed the meaning that is
assigned to it by the Norwegian oil industry. It has been shown how the oil industry, like so many other industries (Mayhew, 1997; Welford, 1997), tries to define sustainability to its own advantage.

The techno-centric tendency that is found in other studies of oil companies was also confirmed to play an important part in the perspectives of the Norwegian oil industry, along with the environmental vision that relies on a ‘traditional mix’ of energy carriers (Ketola, 1996, in press). The Norwegian companies build on an approach to sustainable development that supports the status quo and minor adjustments of the current situation, rather than the reforms or transformations that are called for by other approaches (Hopwood et al., 2005).

The most crucial finding of the study is that the Norwegian oil industry’s definition of sustainability still invites difficult questions that relate to scale. Is it sufficient to reduce some of the harmful emissions? Can a system be called sustainable if it can extend its form somewhat into the future? If the time question is opened up like this, then the oil industry may stand to gain a strategic advantage, given the ambiguous character of such a debate in which a conclusion is hard to agree upon. On both accounts, however, adherents of a strict definition of ecological sustainability will disagree with the oil industry. The industry’s emissions accumulate beyond nature’s capacity to deal with them, and the industry consumes a resource at a rate below its natural reproduction (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002).

It has also been demonstrated how the industry uses a comparison topic to
argue not only for its own continued existence, but also for its expansion. The industry tries to bring some ‘realism’ into the debate to get the public to choose the lesser of two evils. However, none of these strategies can be used to qualify the Norwegian oil industry as sustainable per se. Both arguments are, in a sense, relative and rest on several basic assumptions, and they can be criticised on this account. Rather than expanding Norwegian oil production, a preferred solution would be energy efficiency and conservation, and an increased commitment to develop renewable energy sources.

A stronger political will could propel development towards more sustainable energy systems, which again points to the importance of the home bases of the oil companies and the social pressure that they experience (Rowlands, 2000; Skjærseth, 2005; Skjærseth & Skodvin, 2001). Still, the social, political and economic context in Norway does not require that oil production be scaled down (that the environmental situation may call for such action is another issue). In Norway, reliance on oil and the continuation and even expansion of petroleum production is mostly taken for granted. This makes the situation easier for the oil companies and has also helped them to craft the discourse of an ‘international approach’ to combating climate change. Circumstances may differ in other countries.

Further research should be conducted to analyse the rhetorical strategies of the oil industry in other countries and to broaden the empirical material so that the communication strategies of Norwegian companies can be analysed in more depth. Another fruitful avenue of research would be to investigate whether the rhetoric enjoys success among key stakeholders, such as politicians, the media, environmental NGOs and the public. Does the phrase, ‘sustainable oil production’, have the ring of an oxymoron for these stakeholders, or has the oil industry succeeded in its attempt to
don the cloak of sustainability?

The mere introduction of environmental terms does not, of course, guarantee an improved environment. Several scholars has pointed out that radical changes are needed to reach the goal of sustainability (Sharma & Ruud, 2003). As stated by the International Energy Agency, ‘unfortunately, no matter how we define sustainable development, it remains clear that we are not on the right path. This is as true for the energy sector as it is for other aspects of our modern world’ (2002, p. 3). Thus, it can be argued that using the term ‘sustainable development’ in connection with oil production is environmental tokenism that gives the oil companies the legitimacy to carry on with unsound environmental practices. It is hard not to see the phrase ‘sustainable oil production’ as yet another example of how the oil industry is overselling its green credentials (Beder, 2002; van de Wateringen, 2005).
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