

Fear and loathing of sustainability communication on social media. A study of corporate understandings of communicating about sustainability on social media

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Social media have been argued to transform relations between civil society and corporations (Castelló et al., 2013). From the perspective of corporations, this can be seen as a challenge if social media enable activists and NGOs to criticize corporations for misleading self-presentations (Vestergaard & Uldam, 2022). The oil company BP's rebranding campaign from 2000, when BP changed from standing for British Petrol to Beyond Petroleum, has come to be seen as a classic example. The campaign was immediately criticised as greenwashing and is still cited as a cautionary tale for companies, not least as companies face increasing expectations to act on and communicate about their sustainability. This raises questions about corporations' concerns about their sustainability being criticized by activists and NGOs.

Theoretically, this presentation draws on the notion of CSR communication as 'aspirational talk' with the potential to lead to more sustainable corporate practices (Christensen et al., 2013) and the perspective of sustainability communication as a smokescreen for unsustainable corporate practices (Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011). Rather than taking for granted the positions of either perspective, this article examines empirically the understandings and feelings of managers in multinational corporations.

Empirically, this presentation draws on interviews with heads of communication, digital media, PR, and sustainability in multinational companies, probing their understandings of and feelings about sustainability communication and social media platforms.

We show how managers articulate a tension of sustainability communication: On the one hand, a sense of increasing public expectations of sustainability communication and, on the other, a fear of the risk that sustainability initiatives are criticized by activists and NGOs, e.g., as greenwashing. We show how this fear is amplified by social media. This fear risks eroding the potential of sustainability communication as aspirational talk, because it fosters a reluctance to communicate about sustainability aspirations and incremental steps towards sustainable practices. We argue that this impedes the potential of sustainability communication to work as aspirational talk. Without sustainability communication, critical stakeholders such as NGOs and activists cannot hold companies to account for their actions. This renders

sustainability communication in social media a less potent form of aspirational talk compared to the potential identified by Christensen et al. (2017).

References

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