Rhetoric and Argument in Social and Environmental Reporting: The Dirty Laundry Case

Doris M. Merkl-Davies and Niamh M. Brennan
(Bangor Business School, UK; University College Dublin, Ireland)
d.m.merkl-davies@bangor.ac.uk; Niamh.Brennan@ucd.ie

Keywords: Rhetoric, Argument, Environmental reporting, Stakeholder, Greenpeace

This paper focuses on the interactive element in social and environmental reporting during a legitimacy threat in the form of a controversy between business organisations and a stakeholder over environmental performance. Prior studies on organisational legitimacy threats focus on the analysis of corporate narrative documents, including press releases, annual reports and CSR reports (e.g., Ogden and Clarke, 2005; Linsley and Kajüter, 2008; De Tienne and Lewis, 2005; Castelló and Lozano, 2011). Stakeholder communications relating to violations of social norms and rules or stakeholder values and beliefs are treated as part of the organisational context which is described in order to shed light on corporate reporting (e.g., Hooghiemstra, 2000). An exception is Massey (2001) who, in an experimental setting, finds that the crisis-response consistency of communication by organisations influences perceptions of organisational legitimacy. Thus, most prior research presumes that organisations are in control of legitimacy construction. By contrast, we adopt a relational view by regarding legitimacy as being constructed between organisations and their audiences in a ‘process of reciprocal influence’ (Ginzel et al., 2004, p. 225). This is in line with Suchman’s (1995) discussion of moral legitimacy which arises from a positive normative evaluation of an organisation and its activities by its audiences. As judgements are formed through public discussion, legitimacy is reliant on communication and is achieved by organisations participating in social dialogue (Suchman, 1995, p. 585; Tregidga et al., 2007, p. 5).

We examine a conflict between Greenpeace and international sportswear/fashion firms over environmental performance. Complementary prior research has analysed the
dialogic nature of verbal interactions between the parties involved in this controversy (Brennan et al., 2013). The focus of analysis in this paper is on the use of rhetoric and argument by both sides as a means of influencing audiences’ opinions of the issue of contention, namely the use of hazardous chemicals in organisational supply chains. For this purpose we build on Aristotle’s (2010) triangular framework of *logos* (appealing to logic), *ethos* (appealing to authority), and *pathos* (appealing to emotion) and insights from the ‘New Rhetoric’ movement. We show the outcome of the conflict, which entailed all firms conceding to Greenpeace’s demand, to be dependent on Greenpeace’s power and legitimacy and the urgency of its claim.

Research questions were developed abductively during an iterative process of going backwards and forwards between theories and concepts and data. The overarching research question is: How do parties in a conflict over corporate environmental performance interact? We subdivide this overarching research question into three sub-questions: (1) How does the rhetorical situation/social context influence the interactions? (2) What moves do the parties make in the conflict? (3) How are those moves realised rhetorically?

The publication of Greenpeace’s ‘Dirty Laundry’ report in July 2011 marked the start of what it referred to as its ‘Detox’ campaign. It alleged that 18 brands (16 firms) were using hazardous chemicals in their textile manufacturing processes. This was followed by a second report, ‘Hung out to Dry’, in August 2011. The purpose of the campaign was twofold, namely (1) to voice its concern regarding the industry’s failure to safeguard environmental standards throughout its supply chains and (2) to draw public attention to this failure with the intention of pressurising the firms to take corrective action. This controversy played out in a series of 20 press releases issued by both sides (Greenpeace and six sportswear/fashion firms) over a two-month period. Three of the six firms responding to Greenpeace’s accusation of misconduct disputed Greenpeace’s claims (NIKE, adidas, H&M), while three (PUMA, LACOSTE and G-Star RAW) conceded to Greenpeace’s demand. Greenpeace used negative publicity to pressurise the initially unyielding firms to comply with its demand. Our findings show the extensive use of rhetoric by all parties involved in the conflict. Greenpeace used metaphors that resonate with the firms’ key stakeholders, i.e., consumers and the media (metaphors of housekeeping, size, racing, sport and fashion), in order to coerce the firms to agree to
eliminate hazardous chemicals from their supply chains by 2020. The sportswear/fashion firms responded by using metaphors which redefine the constructs of competition and speed inherent in Greenpeace’s claims (metaphors of journey, complexity and co-operation).

Our paper builds on three streams of literature: (1) research that views social and environmental reporting as relational – as such we respond to Bebbington et al.’s (2007) call to apply dialogic thinking to social and environmental reporting; (2) research on crisis management and organisational responses to legitimacy threats; and (3) research analysing corporate reporting and communication using text analysis approaches based on the concepts of rhetoric and argument. For this purpose, we extend the work of Brennan and Gray (2000) and Brennan et al. (2010) on interaction during takeovers to a social and environmental context by building on the work of Coupland (2005) and Higgins and Walker (2012) on rhetoric and argument in social and environmental reporting.

The paper makes four contributions to the literature. First, we introduce a dynamic and interactive element to stakeholder theory which is based on the view of conflict resolution between organisations and a stakeholder as dependent on the stakeholder’s power, legitimacy, and the urgency of its claim. Power constitutes the ability to achieve intended outcomes and results from access to material and symbolic resources, including the ability to mobilise support from other key stakeholders. Rhetorical skill is crucial in gaining support by persuading audiences that firms’ environmental practices and policies violate social norms and rules relating to pollution. Second, our analysis focuses on interactions in the form of moves (i.e., speech acts or discursive strategies whose objective is to achieve a specific social purpose, such as excusing, threatening, or apologising) between parties involved in the conflict. Third, we develop an analytical framework which situates environmental reporting in a specific rhetorical situation and links rhetoric, argument, and metaphor. Fourth, we highlight the use of metaphor as a powerful means of persuasion in public controversies.
References


