



Ethos, logos, pathos: Strategies of persuasion in social/environmental reports

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ABSTRACT

We demonstrate how persuasive strategies activate the 'middle ground' discourses of responsible and sustainable business constructed in three social/environmental reports. Drawing on insights from impression management and communication studies, and Kenneth Burke's understanding that rhetoric is all pervasive, we focus on Aristotle's rhetorical 'proofs': *ethos* (credibility), *logos* (reason), and *pathos* (emotion). We study the social/environmental reports produced by three New Zealand companies during a wider discursive struggle over the 'proper' role of business in society. We argue that persuasive strategies facilitate the social effects of 'middle ground' discourse by making business-centred understandings of social responsibility and sustainability appear *reasonable* and business organisations appear *trustworthy* in their pursuit of sustainable development. This study complements discourse analyses of social/environmental reporting by providing a finer-grained picture of how language use influences how social actors think, feel and act.

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1. Introduction

"Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is meaning, there is persuasion" (Kenneth Burke, 1969, p. 72)

For years business organisations have publicly reported their social/environmental performance (KPMG, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008; UNEP/SustainAbility, 2004), but questions persist about the quality, meaning and effects of them doing so. For some theorists, social/environmental reporting (SER)² can represent how business organisations impact on the community, and is seen as a means of discharging accountability for those impacts (Gray, Walters, Bebbington, & Thomson, 1995; Gray, Owen, & Adams, 1996). Others see it as little more than an attempt to manipulate stakeholders and generate favourable impressions of organisational performance (Bebbington, Larrinaga, & Moneva, 2008; Brown & Deegan, 1999; Deegan, 2002; Deegan & Rankin, 1996; Deegan, Rankin, & Vought, 2000; Deegan, Rankin, & Tobin, 2002; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Milne & Patten, 2002; O'Donovan, 2002). Critical theorists cast doubt on the overall value of SER, and highlight its broader socio-structural effects. They maintain that radical social change is required in order to effect a transition to 'sustainable

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² In NZ, as elsewhere, there is some ambiguity concerning the terminology used by business organisations when describing their reporting efforts, with 'Sustainable Development Report', 'Social/Environmental Reporting' and 'triple bottom line reporting' all being used. We also recognise that much of the early accountability-based reporting was concerned with social and/or environmental accounting – of which reporting was a part. We use the term 'social/environmental reporting' (SER) to capture the general category of reports that companies voluntarily produce to disclose social and environmental performance data, impacts, policies and targets.

development', but SER shapes social understandings in ways that reproduce prevailing social relations (see Cooper, 1992; Jones, 1996; Lehman, 1999; Maunders & Burritt, 1991; Puxty, 1986; Spence, 2007; Tinker, Lehman, & Neimark, 1991).

Critical theorists use a variety of interpretive and discourse analytic approaches to illustrate how the language used in social/environmental reports facilitate its socio-structural effects. Some reveal, for example, how metaphors, such as the 'triple bottom line', blend radical (and contrasting) notions of 'environment' and 'development' into a 'middle ground' discourse of 'business *and* sustainability' (Milne, Tregidga, & Walton, 2009). A 'middle ground' discourse does not deny that there are social and environmental issues associated with business activity (Milne et al., 2009), but it does assert the superiority of the market, technology, and economic growth as the means of addressing them (Laine, 2005). Language use reinforces prevailing norms by constructing discourses that preserve the social relations and structures of contemporary capitalism. Language use also has ideological effects (Spence, 2007). Not only does it construct discourses that influence business thinking and behavior, it does so in a way that also marginalizes alternative discourses (Livesey, 2002) and shapes how other social actors come to 'know' and 'do' sustainable development (Milne et al., 2009).

Here we focus on the use of *persuasive* language in social/environmental reports. We adopt a Burkean notion of rhetoric (Burke, 1966), and reveal how persuasive language and other persuasive symbols used in these reports reveal evidence of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals to *ethos* (credibility), *logos* (reason), and *pathos* (emotion). We extend critical perspectives about SER, and complement discourse analyses of this practice. Our approach differs from impression management and strategic communication studies that examine how persuasion is used to demonstrate how an organisation *conforms* to societal expectation. Our approach is more aligned with discourse analyses, but rather than emphasising the *mechanics* of discourse construction, we suggest persuasion *influences* social actors to accept particular discourses. In essence, we argue that it is persuasive strategies that influence how social actors think, feel and act in relation to the 'middle ground' discourses constructed in social/environmental reports. By unraveling the threads that form the rhetorical fabric of social/environmental reports, we expose something of the hidden 'mystery' (Burke, 1969) – the persuasive strategies – that contribute to a veneer of social order and meaningful human contexts.

We studied three social/environmental reports produced by New Zealand companies in 2003. These reports – of a foreign-owned bank, a casino/hotel chain, and a large discount retailer – were some of the first produced in New Zealand. We chose these reports because they were produced at a time when social understandings about sustainability were under-developed and still evolving in New Zealand (Gray & Milne, 2002; Springett, 2003, 2005). Studying these early reports enables us to isolate the role of persuasion in the discursive struggle occurring at that time about the 'appropriate' role of business in society.

In summary, we found that a variety of persuasive appeals are used in the three reports. Each of these appeals construct intersecting persuasive appeals to credibility (*ethos*), reason (*logos*) and emotion (*pathos*), but each of the reports tends to be dominated by one or the other. Westpac relied on presenting a *credible* persona. SKYCITY also constructed a particular identity (a paternalistic benefactor), but did so by relying on *emotional* appeals. Retailer The Warehouse concentrated on *demonstrating* that they were 'walking the talk'. These persuasive appeals facilitate a sense of the *reasonableness* of middle ground discourse, and assure the *trustworthiness* of business to drive social and environmental change.

In the next section we situate our study alongside discourse analyses of SER. These studies reveal specifically how the language used in these reports constructs a middle ground discourse that is tied to prevailing social relations. We then describe the contribution that rhetorical analysis can make to this work, noting the work of Kenneth Burke, before detailing the background to this study, and the methodology we used. We then present the findings of our analysis, illustrating how persuasive strategies make appeals to *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* in order to reinforce the middle ground discourses constructed in each report. Our conclusion serves to summarise our interpretation, and to identify opportunities for future research.

2. Social and environmental reporting

Debates over the meaning, quality, and effects of SER centre on whether reporting of this nature can effect a transition toward a sustainable future. Accountability-based perspectives emphasise the transformational potential of SER, and assert the role of managerial agency to bring about change (Gray et al., 1996). The discharge of accountability to stakeholders will provide a comprehensive picture of organisational impacts and expose the contradictions between economic development, social justice and ecological sustainability. Such insights will raise the consciousness of managers and motivate changes in their practice. Insights about business impacts also pave the way for stakeholder activism. Stakeholders will force change on business through the market, their employment choices, and through regulation (Gray, Javad, Power, & Sinclair, 2001).

Experience of the last 20 years shows, however, that most reporting is of poor quality and little change has been achieved (Milne & Gray, 2007). Managers do not produce comprehensive ('warts and all') accounts of their organisations' impacts (Gray & Bebbington, 2000; Gray & Milne, 2002). Rather, they appear chiefly motivated to preserve the legitimacy of their organisations (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Deegan, 2002; Milne & Patten, 2002; O'Donovan, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2003). Worryingly, managers may not even understand sustainability (Bebbington & Thomson, 1996; Gray & Bebbington, 2000; Springett, 2003) and many believe that minor adjustments to 'business as usual' represent best practice (see Bebbington, Higgins, & Frame, 2009). In light of these observations, some researchers have turned to interpretive and discourse approaches to comprehend how corporate responsibility and sustainability is coming to be understood, and how those understandings influence business and social practice.

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