

Dossier

The polyphony of values and the value of polyphony

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Abstract: While human communication is inherently symbolic and thus potentially vague, ambiguous and polyphonic, there is a growing emphasis on certainty, accuracy and consistency in everything contemporary organizations say and do. Organizational messages about corporate *values*, in particular, are expected to accurately and unambiguously depict the organizational sender “behind” the words. Current communication principles, in other words, seek to reduce or eliminate the polyphonic potential of symbolic communication. In this paper we challenge this trend, arguing that the polyphony of corporate values is valuable because it facilitates change by inviting alternative interpretations and stimulating participation and critique. Lack of accuracy in organizational messages – including inconsistencies between what organizations say and what they do – may be an important driver of organizational and social change, because such differences have potential to raise expectations and apply pressure on organizational actors to improve their practices.

Keywords: symbolic communication, polyphony, aspirations, change

La polyphonie des valeurs et la valeur de la polyphonie

Résumé: Alors que la communication humaine est intrinsèquement symbolique et donc potentiellement vague, ambiguë et polyphonique, il y a un accent croissant mis sur la sécurité, l'exactitude et la cohérence dans tout ce que les organisations contemporaines disent et font. Les messages organisationnels sur les valeurs d'entreprise, en particulier, sont censés décrire avec précision et sans ambiguïté l'expéditeur organisationnel « derrière » les mots. En d'autres termes, les principes de communication actuels cherchent à réduire ou éliminer le potentiel polyphonique de la communication symbolique. Dans cet article, nous remettons en question cette tendance, en faisant valoir que la polyphonie des valeurs de l'entreprise est précieuse, car elle facilite le changement en invitant aux interprétations alternatives et à stimuler la participation et la critique. Le manque de précision dans les messages de l'organisation - y compris les incohérences entre ce que les organisations disent et ce qu'ils font - peuvent être un moteur important de changement organisationnel et social puisque ces différences ont le potentiel de susciter des attentes et exercer de la pression sur les acteurs organisationnels pour améliorer leurs pratiques.

Mots-clés: communication symbolique, polyphonie, aspirations, changement

Introduction

Semiotically speaking, most human communication is *symbolic* in the sense that its meaning is contingent upon social customs and conventions. As a particular class of signs, symbols are connected to the objects they represent by virtue of a law, a rule or a more or less established agreement (Peirce, 1985; see also Johansen, 1985). In contrast to more “motivated signs” (Barthes, 1977), symbols have no qualities in common with the objects they stand for, like icons have, and are not affected by these objects in any contiguous or causal way, like indices. When it comes to symbolic communication, the link between the signifier and the signified, in other words, is ambiguous and uncertain and not given once and for all, but subject to more or less contestable interpretations. As such, symbolic communication holds great potential for *gaps* or perceived gaps between what is said and what is understood. And since nothing in the human brain makes it possible to distinguish with any certainty between fantasy and reality, between hallucination and perception (Morin, 1973), such gaps cannot be eliminated once and for all. Symbolic communication, therefore, is bound to be challenged by different audiences for its lack of essential consistency with and connection to the world it claims to represent.

Obviously, senders may seek to reduce the ambiguity of their words by clarifying what they mean in each particular context, for example by explaining and elaborating on specific terms and their practical implications, thereby narrowing the field of possible interpretations. This may be the preferred strategy for communicators

whose primary concern is to reduce the risk of being misunderstood. In other situations, however, senders may decide to retain vagueness and ambiguity keeping the field of interpretation open, perhaps in order to gain time to think and explore further and/or in the hope of appealing to many different audiences at once. When organizations and decision makers, for example, talk about corporate sustainability and responsibility they are usually careful not to specify too much in order not to be held to very specific understandings of their words (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2015). Thus, while symbolic communication is a field where polyphony has potential to thrive, such potential may be suppressed *or* released for strategic reasons.

In this paper, we focus especially on the latter type of communication, as exemplified by corporate *values*. As a specific type of organizational communication where polyphony is usually allowed to persist, indeed may be needed to ensure ongoing exploration and improvement, corporate values are typically formulated in an abstract language, without specific details or concrete indications of follow-up action. Such “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984) allows communicators to promote a feeling of unity and agreement across several different audiences without being held to very specific interpretations of their words. These features, according to Eisenberg, facilitate change. Conversely, too much precision may stifle change: “When organizational goals are stated concretely, they are often strikingly ineffective” (Eisenberg, 1984: 231).

In spite of these insights, the trend these years in most professional communication from corporations and their leaders, as well as from governments and institutions, is that signifiers *must* correspond to signifieds and that organizational values, in other words, describe organizational reality as it “is”, free of deceit and pretension. This trend is essentially organized around the ideal of *consistency*, emphasizing that consistency forms the basis of trust and credibility and that organizations therefore must avoid gaps and discrepancies in their communication (e.g. Riel, 1995; Goodman, 2000; Balmer & Greyser, 2003). This we see, for example, when organizations and their leaders are urged to walk-the-talk, that is, practice what they preach or let action follow their words.

While such prescriptions make sense in many day-to-day situations, they cannot stand alone. Intellectuals and poets like, for example, Oscar Wilde and Ralph Waldo Emerson are often quoted for ridiculing a one-sided emphasis on consistency in social and political life, claiming that such emphasis runs counter to creativity and imagination. Still, we experience these years a growing intolerance for discrepancies in the communication of organizations and governments (Schultz, Castello and Morsing, 2013). These social actors, especially, are expected to align their messages as well as their behaviors, for example between front stage and back stage, between ideals and practice, and between current messages and messages of the past. Such emphasis on consistency is obviously not equally distributed across genres of communication. Thus, while inconsistencies and discrepancies among messages or between talk and action are accepted in some genres such as poetry and love letters *or*

regarded as defining feature of the genre itself, such as advertising or some types of branding (where humor and hyperbole are flourishing), the dominant expectancy when it comes to corporate ideals and values is that the messages must accurately and unambiguously reflect the underlying organizational reality (Okoye, 2009; Roberts, 2003; Waddock & Googins, 2011).

Insisting on communication that describes the world as it “is” and thus expecting a direct or 1:1 relationship between corporate communication and organizational reality, this trend is implicitly calling for communication devoid of arbitrariness and convention, thus flirting with the idea that signs may be totally motivated (Baudrillard, 1981). Contemporary ideals for professional communication, thus, are essentially rejecting the polysemic nature of human communication. If we, alternatively, conceive of organization as *polyphony*, that is, as multiple contrasting voices that express themselves simultaneously and autonomously (Hazen, 1993; Humphreys & Brown, 2002), we are in a better position to understand how organizational talk about values – even when it does not accurately or unambiguously represent current organizational practices – may stimulate change.

The aim of this paper is to show that since human communication is overwhelmingly symbolic, and thus essentially vague, ambiguous and polyphonic, a one-sided insistence on accuracy and consistency in organizational messages may prevent organizations and their leaders from navigating in complex environments and thus accomplishing goals of organizational and social change. More specifically, we first discuss the limitations of the consistency ideal, as it is currently pursued by contemporary organizations, arguing that most value talk from organizations escape the ambitions of message control inherent in this ideal, especially because many voices participate in defining what the organization “is”. Secondly, we argue that since communication constitutes organization (and not simply represent it), the polyphony of organizational talk becomes an essential dimension of organizational change. Thirdly, we point out that while inconsistency may be rejected because it is often regarded as a source of hypocrisy, hypocrisy may be unavoidable in environments shaped by conflicting values and ideas. Finally, we argue and illustrate with a few examples how the inconsistencies that potentially accompany corporate values may be important drivers of change, primarily because perceived differences between organizational talk and current action have potential to raise expectations and apply pressure on corporate actors to improve practices.

1. Consistency practices and the illusion of control

It is not difficult to understand and, to some extent, appreciate the current emphasis on accuracy and consistency in corporate and political communication as it is expressed these years by many different audiences, including critical NGOs, inquisitive media, employees and management consultants. The potent combination of new information technologies, “corporate meltdown”, financial scandals and ecological calamities leaves the impression that the general public has increased access to an

organizational reality “behind” organizational words and thus a growing ability to judge whether the two are “properly” connected. The implicit assumption seems to be that a tenacious insistence on consistency will create even more transparency and insight and thus, eventually, improve organizational and political practices (Strathern, 2000; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). So strong is this conviction that organizations and political parties increasingly implement consistency strategies to avoid criticism and respond to the growing demand for transparency (Christensen & Langer, 2009).

While many disciplines, professions and practices emphasize the value of consistency as a source of organizational accountability, transparency and trust, especially the field of *corporate communication* has built its identity around the promise of avoiding inconsistencies in professional communication. Corporate communication is the notion, the ideal and the managerial process of communicating an organization as a unique, coherent and credible entity (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Van Riel (1995), for example, describes corporate communication as an all-embracing framework designed to manage “the total business message” (see also, Åberg, 1990; Harrison, 1995). Within this framework, integration and “orchestration” of different messages and behaviours in order to avoid gaps and inconsistencies becomes a central managerial activity. Where corporate communication used to be a rather vague term referring loosely to messages from (major) corporations, today it designates a specific mindset that is applied to many, if not all, sorts of organizations (Cornelissen, 2008; Torp, 2009), including even political parties. According to this mindset, senders can avoid ambiguity by managing communication as an integrated and consistent whole (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008).

Although the promise of integration and orchestration may sound appealing to managers, who fear the judgment of critical audiences zealously looking for gaps and inconsistencies, such managerial control of the overall message from an organization is beyond reach (Christensen, Firat, & Torp, 2008). As Humphreys and Brown (2002: 422) point out, “...organizations are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, involving multiple dialogical practices that occur simultaneously and sequentially.” And while polyphony may be repressed by specifications and other types of follow-up communication, the inability of senders to maintain a consistent presence is particularly noticeable when major corporations talk about their values. Phrased in abstract language without specific details, corporate values are prone to be challenged or manipulated by critical audiences. While some audiences openly reject the value statements, others play around with the messages and create unflattering spoofs out of official corporate images. Consider, for example BP’s rebranding slogan “Beyond Petroleum”. A Google search of this slogan quickly demonstrates that BP’s objective with its rebranding project is greatly overshadowed by alternative interpretations.





As this example illustrates, the sender organization does not “own” its own communication and does not decide the limits of its own messages (Christensen, Firat, & Cornelissen, 2009). What represents an organization to its audience is not given once and for all, especially not when it comes to value statements, such as BP’s, where the organization releases the symbolic potential of its message and leaves the field of interpretations open. Such cases, where many voices inside and outside the organization may claim to represent the organization as it “is”, calls on us to challenge the notion of organizational monolith. While increased precision and consistency, and thus attempts to suppress polyphony, may seem a necessary and, perhaps, attractive solution to the individual organization caught in interpretative struggles with critical stakeholders, such approach if applied to organizations in general may deprive society of an important source of renewal and change.

To appreciate the implications of this point, we need to acknowledge that communication is not simply an activity an organization performs once a while, in between other important activities, but is itself constitutive of the phenomenon we call an ‘organization’ (Cooren, 1999; Schoeneborn, 2011).

2. When talk is organization – and vice versa

It is well established in the philosophy of language and beyond that reality is typified and experienced through language (Schutz, 1967), which is our primary “organ of reality” (Cassirer, 1953: 8). As such, language directs our attention, shapes our perception and engages us in new types of ideals and activities. Since language, in other words, is consequential, talk may be seen *as* action (e.g., Austin, 1962; Foucault, 1972; Searle, 1969). Based on this insight, scholars in the fields of organization, management and communication have variously argued that organizations are “phenomena in and of language” (Boje et al., 2004, p. 571; Grant, Keenoy, & Os-

wick, 1998), that communication has organizing properties (Cooren, 1999; Taylor & van Every, 2000) and that organizations, accordingly, are discursive constructions (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

More specifically, Taylor and van Every (2000: 4) argue that “organizations emerge in communication,” that is, through the ways leaders and members speak about and account for organizational decisions, plans and activities. Communication and organization, according to Taylor and van Every, are *equivalent* terms or mutually constitutive. Hereby, they do not suggest a simple one-to-one correspondence between what an organization says and what it does, but emphasize that talk is a formative activity that sets up, shapes, reproduces and transforms organizational reality. In this perspective, talk is action just as action speaks in a number of significant ways. In a similar manner, Luhmann’s (1995) systems theory explains how organizations are constituted in communication. Luhmann’s point of departure is that all social systems use communication as their particular mode of reproduction (Luhmann, 1986). As a specific type of social system, an organization, according to Luhmann, is an autopoietic (auto-poiesis from *Greek*: self-creation) system of interconnected communicative events. Regarding talk as the raw material for constructing the organization, Luhmann explains how organizations are (re)produced in a constant flow of communication in which self-referring chains of decisions organize and move the organization onward toward new goals and practices (see also, Schoeneborn, 2011).

Inspired by such understanding of communication and organization, and their mutual relationship, scholars of organizational communication have argued that organizations talk about themselves not simply to inform their surroundings about ongoing activities – and, thus, deliver accurate descriptions of the organization as it “is” here and now – but to confirm and celebrate entrenched self-perceptions of the organization or discover what the organization *might* become in the future (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013). Organizational talk, in other words, is autocommunicational in the sense that messages ostensibly directed at external audiences simultaneously speak to sender organizations and their own members (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Christensen, 1997). Through autocommunication, especially if it is broadcast in media of high status and authority, organizations may seduce themselves to believe in appealing messages about themselves, messages that enhance preferred identities and self-images (Christensen & Cheney, 2000). Simultaneously, however, such communication is necessary for organizations (and other social actors) to explore new ideas and practices and, thus, inspire change.

In such processes, accuracy and consistency are not chief concerns. Autocommunicational exploration and inspiration is driven primarily by plausibility (cf. Weick, 1995) and the desire for favourable images of the organization able to persuade and motivate managers, employees and other relevant audiences to improve daily practices and inspire top management to set new goals and standards (Christensen, 1997). Talk is organization and organization is talk. Communication practices focused on exclusively on consistency, insisting on mutually coherent messages

that *only* describe already achieved goals and ideals, not only ignore the polyphonic potential of symbolic communication, but fail to stimulate organizational and social changes. This point will be elaborated in the remaining article.

3. Inconsistencies and the significance of hypocrisy

In addition to the essential polyphony that confronts the notion of organization as a coherent monolith, a major challenge to communicative consistency resides in the fact that most organizations are shaped by conflicting demands and concerns (Brunsson, 2003). Contemporary organizations, thus, not only need to secure growth and profits to shareholders, but also – and simultaneously – to contribute to employment, provide good working conditions including possibilities for personal development and decent salaries for employees, good service for customers, and sustainability and responsibility for society at large. And while some organizations *may* be able to establish some workable balance or trade-off between such different demands and concerns (Porter & Kramer, 2002, 2006), they are rarely mutually compatible and never fully complementary. Thus, a wholehearted pursuit of one or some of these goals inevitably impinges negatively on the ability of the organization to fulfil some of the others (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; March, 1994; Wijen, 2014). Inconsistencies are therefore inevitable in most organizations.

Since inconsistencies are regarded as sources of hypocrisy, however, they are often condemned as unacceptable. A conventional understanding defines hypocrisy as “the assumption or postulation of moral standards to which one’s own behaviour does not conform” (Oxford Dictionary, cited in Brunsson, 2003: 202). Hypocrisy, thus, is usually associated with pretence and double standards. According to Brunsson, however, hypocrisy is also at play outside a strictly moral realm, for example whenever the links between talk, decisions and actions are loosened or when these activities have varying degrees of correspondence. While hypocrisy is usually regarded as a problem because it challenges our ethical standards, Brunsson argues that hypocrisy may be a solution in environments shaped by conflicting interest and demands, because it allows organizations to address different audiences in different ways, giving some the benefit of talk, others the benefit of decisions and yet others the benefit of actions. Instead of talk leading straight to decisions and actions, each part fulfills its own purpose and pleases its specific audience – at least temporarily. Discontent often resurfaces and hypocrisy may not be stable in a critical environment where many audiences insist on keeping an organization to its words (Brunsson, 2003; Christensen et al., 2013; Haack et al., 2012).

Whether we condemn or condone hypocrisy, understood as such loose links between talk, decision and action, we have to acknowledge that connections among the three are not always as strong as organizational audiences expect or might prefer. What is said and done, for example, can have varying degrees of correspondence depending on the situation and the resources available. This is true, as Brunsson (2003) points out, because managers face conflicting demands and goals, as men-

tioned above, but also because they talk, decide and act on different occasions and in different contexts. Different audiences expect different types of talk and while some fora are designed to elicit talk, others are more suitable for action. In addition, most interesting forms of talk – for example, talk about food waste or CO₂ reduction – are difficult, if not impossible, to honor with corresponding action in the very moment the words are uttered. Time, in other words, plays a central role when assessing whether there is consistency or not. In some situations, initiatives are first talk (and often, lots of it), *then* action (e.g. Haack, et al., 2012; Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013). This is the case, for example, when managers and other organizational communicators are uncertain about the exact steps to take in order to implement the initiatives and/or when they talk in order to appeal to different audiences. In other cases, organizations experiment more or less spontaneously and only seek to put the action into words in order to make sense of it afterwards (Weick, 1979). Both situations may be at work when organizations talk about sustainability or social responsibility.

As Brunsson makes clear, while there are things that organizations can say, but not do – at least not very easily – there are other things they can do, but not say. Subscription to ethical principles, for example, may be easier for organizations and their managers to articulate than to actually put into action, perhaps because they are vaguely formulated in order to appeal to many different types of organizations. Conversely, while organizations may find it fairly easy to focus exclusively on product features, they may have a harder time explaining or admitting that this is in fact their primary focus, especially in a world that calls for engagement for the surrounding world. Consistency between talk and action in such cases might, according to Brunsson, produce more immorality than the hypocritical behavior that we eschew: Morality does not necessarily gain from the cessation of hypocrisy. If we have previously talked and made decisions that were more moral than our actions, then the cessation of hypocrisy means that we are now talking and making decisions that are as immoral as our actions ... For example, hypocrisy makes it possible for a company with a polluting production and product (a car producer, for instance) to establish environmental plans and to decide upon environmental goals. Without hypocrisy, it would admit that its operations were environmentally hazardous, that it planned to continue these operations, and it would have to defend them as being necessary and unavoidable. Then many people would probably think that the company polluted not only the physical environment but the moral environment as well (Brunsson, 2003: 222).

According to this logic, values and ideals that are difficult to live up to need more supporters, in other words more talk, than values and ideals that can easily be performed. If only those relatively few organizations that are able to perform the values from day one and around the clock are allowed to celebrate and articulate them out loud, the values may not catch on as broadly and as quickly as we may wish. To require immediate and full consistency between what organizations say and do would deprive organizations of some of the dynamics inherent in their talk.

4. Inconsistency as a driver of change

Obviously, certain types of organizational talk need to reflect organizational reality more precisely than others (Rasche, 2012; Gilbert, Rasche & Waddock, 2011). Product specifications or financial statements, for example, are expected to provide very accurate and detailed descriptions of the specific organizational realities they refer to. And although such descriptions are symbolic like most human communication, they need to be *perceived* as precise for organizations to function properly. Similar expectations usually surround organizational communication such as environmental reporting, although perceived precision in this case is more essential to secure the sender's legitimacy. Much of what top managers say to organizational members or other audiences, however, is not about projects or ideals *already* accomplished, but about ambitions, beliefs and hopes, in other words, aspirations for the future. As Shotter (1993) writes: "...our talk is not about something which already actually exists, but is about what might be, what could be the case, or what something should be like" (p. 153). In such cases, inconsistencies between organizational talk and reality may be essential drivers of change.

Communication designed to motivate personnel, for example to increase daily efforts and improve specific practices, is not about what the organization already is, but about what it might become. And although a good sense of perceived reality among the audience may be essential for the communicator to actually instigate the desired changes, the manager is not an engineer or an accountant informing us about the true state of the organization, but a motivator telling us what can possibly be *made* true (Christensen et al., 2013), provided certain necessary steps are taken. Importantly, however, the communication task of the manager is not to provide a fully accurate account of what remains to be done in order to reach the goals, but to convince the audience that the goal is realistic and within reach. To do that, it may not be sufficient to assure organizational members and other audiences that the organization is "working on it" and earnestly trying to become better, even though such message may be accurate and honest. Leaving the impression that lots remains to be done, such truthful descriptions may instead demotivate internal and external stakeholders and thus prevent a more attractive reality becoming true. Leaders therefore, as Thayer (1988) points out, do not focus so much on what "is", but seek to present reality "as it *might* be, giving what "is" thereby a different "face" (cited in Weick (1995: 10).

Such communicative practice is evident also beyond managerial pep talk or other direct attempts to motivate employees. Consider, for example, the following statements in an annual report from the Danish pump producer Grundfos (Grundfos, 2011): "We commit ourselves to environmentally sustainable business practices." "We contribute to global sustainability through groundbreaking technologies, which improve the quality of life for people and take care of the planet." "...sustainability remains an integral part of our objective and values."

Although we may well discuss what commitment entails more precisely, questioning *how* committed the respective organization is to the sustainability issue, how much it contributes to the quality of life of people and how integrated its sustainability efforts are with other business practices, such statements may still play a significant role for organizations and society. To announce ideals and ambitions is to create expectations, especially if such announcements are made publicly in media of high status and authority (Christensen et al., 2013). Articulating ambitions while the world is listening is significantly more demanding than keeping the ideals to oneself, because such communication empowers stakeholders, both inside and outside the organization, with ammunition to increase pressure on organizations to align their actions with their words (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). In such cases, the combination of inconsistencies between talk and action *and* demands for increased consistency is essential to drive change.

An interesting illustration of such dynamics is provided by Haack, Schoeneborn and Wickert (2012) in their study of the Equator Principles and their adaptation and use by financial institutions. While many of the institutions in their study initially subscribed to the principles only ceremonially, that is, simply to *look* good, their official subscription gradually set processes of change in motion not only because external stakeholders enforced compliance, but also because organizational members began to expect and demand alignment between words and action. More specifically, Haack et al. show how representatives from the banks reproduced the “songs” of critical NGOs, emphasizing the need for the organization to change and live up to its own ideals and promises. Haack et al. describe this process as a “Trojan horse” because the new ways of talking about responsibility sowed the seeds of novel practices among employees and gave voice to internal activists. Combined with new job functions associated with the implementation of the Equator Principles, such talk stimulates what Haack et al. call a “creeping commitment” to the ideals. Had the involved organizations not dared to announce their subscription to the Equator Principles before they were able to live up to the 24/7, the talk had not been able to drive the change.

Livesey and Graham (2007) demonstrate similar dynamics in their study of Royal Dutch/Shell Group. Focusing on how eco-talk emerged in Shell through the 1990s after a period of intense critique of the organization, they show how this talk gradually became a creative force in changing organizational perceptions, affecting priorities, and channelling corporate resources into sustainable practices. Simultaneously, Shell’s new eco-talk at once reflected and shaped the understandings of environmental responsibility in society at large. Livesey and Graham’s study, thus, illustrate that the talk of large corporations has the potential to transform not only the perceptions but also the practices of social actors, including the organizations themselves, even when their actions are not fully living up to their words.

For such dynamics to unfold, thus, consistency between words and action is not the only critical condition. In fact, it may be argued that strict attempts to enforce consistency between words and action will limit the performative and pragmatic

dimensions of organizational talk and thus delay or obstruct the changes sought for. To take advantage of the transformative potential of organizational talk presupposes an willingness to tolerate temporary inconsistencies between talk and action and to subject such inconsistencies to potential pressure from activists, interest groups, regulators, journalists, and other critical stakeholders, including the organization's own employees. In other words, if change is the ultimate goal it is essential that organizations air their ambitions, beliefs and hopes as much as possible in public domains, even when they have difficulties living up to their own words.

Christensen et al. (2013) apply this line of thinking to the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR). With their notion of "aspirational talk", understood as communication to which current organizational practices cannot yet live up, Christensen et al. argue that the articulation of organizational ambitions in the area of CSR is essential in stimulating new insight and moving organizations forward toward higher CSR standards and better practices. While they acknowledge that corporate CSR aspirations do not unfold automatically or predictably into corporate CSR initiatives, such aspirations, especially when announced in public media, help define or illuminate a collective "horizon" of excellence to which employees, NGOs and other stakeholders can hold the organization accountable (see also, Lunheim, 2005). Based on these insights, Christensen et al. challenge the conventional understanding of CSR communication as superficial, as opposed to CSR action, arguing that also talk is action and often a highly important type of action necessary to set further changes in motion.

If we reject this insight and insist on absolute consistency between talk and action, as social critics, journalists and media tend to do these days, many actors would have to keep quiet, and thus lose an important vehicle for exploration (Weick, 1995). Moreover, society would lose important input to the development of higher standards, within CSR and beyond. Talk that does not reflect current organizational practices is therefore preferable to situations where organizations refrain from articulating ideals out of a fear of being held to their words. Extending this line of thinking to the rebranding efforts of BP mentioned above, it is possible to argue that aspirational self-presentations from major corporations such as BP are essential building blocks in creating new CSR expectations, in the oil industry and beyond. While sceptics may object to such analysis, claiming that BP should have refrained from using its slogan 'beyond petroleum' until its "house" was in complete order, including standards of safety on its oil platforms, it is important to acknowledge that aspirations from major, iconic corporations play a significant role in defining ideal aiming-points and preferable ways of thinking and acting for other corporate players.

Conclusion

Although the growing emphasis on consistency between corporate talk and action is understandable given the many cases of scandals and fraud in recent years, this ideal cannot stand alone. Consistency and inconsistency are complementary forces in the process of moving organizations toward better practices. Although

inconsistencies may be unpleasant for corporate senders and unacceptable for (some of) their audiences, they may nonetheless be essential drivers of organizational and social change. Aspirational talk, defined as differences or inconsistencies between what organizations claim about themselves and what they currently are able to live up to, raise expectations in society by defining a collective notion of excellence to which employees, NGOs and other stakeholders can hold the organization accountable. Without some tolerance for differences and inconsistencies, such dynamics cannot unfold as easily, in which case both corporations and society stand to lose.

Importantly, this argument does not downplay the significance of public scrutiny and critique (Christensen et al., 2013). Rather, it suggests that a combination of unrestricted articulation of corporate ideals, policy commitments, activist pressure and regulation may be ideal to ensure that organizational value talk is followed by suitable action. If the gap between reality and aspiration in this way is closed, it may be re-opened by setting new aspirations to ensure organizational dynamics. It is through communication that organizations (and individuals) inspire themselves to set higher standards and formulate interesting aspirations. Only by articulating such aspirations loud and clear so that significant others can hear it, do they become real and binding to their senders.

The remaining issues, of course, concern the optimal conditions for corporate talk to unfold into appropriate action. How big differences are we willing to accept between corporate ideals and corporate behavior? How much inconsistency can we as society tolerate? And for how long? To what extent and in what situations should society and its members, in other words, allow corporations to articulate values they are not presently able to live up to? These questions have no theoretical answers and should probably be kept open to allow for changes in the meanings and implications of what corporations and other social actors say and do. Although it may seem tempting at times to insist that corporate words always reflect corporate deeds, the real challenge may be to urge corporations to use inconsistencies productively to highlight and debate differences that are essential to change.

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