BP'S CONSTRUCTION OF AN ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY ON ITS WEBSITE: A CASE STUDY OF DISCURSIVE LEGITIMIZATION

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Abstract

The paper presents a critical discourse analysis of the website of one of the world's major oil companies, Beyond Petroleum (BP), formerly British Petroleum, with the focus on investigating the construction of BP's corporate identity. The analysis reveals that BP enacts multiple positive discursive roles, including the identities of an indispensable organization, a philanthropist, an environmentally conscious company, an explorer, a researcher, an educator and an American dream achiever. These roles serve as a potent legitimizing strategy since they enable BP to be associated with higher social and moral values. The analysis shows that BP's environmentally protective ethos adopts the ideology of the domination of human beings over nature through technology, an ideology which is suited to the company's profit-making purpose.

Keywords

corporate identity, discursive roles, legitimization, Beyond Petroleum, environmentally protective ethos, human domination over nature

1   Introduction

Commercial companies' official websites, a medium of communication that allows these organizations to easily reach a broad general public, form an important site for the establishment of the organization's identity and its positioning towards stakeholders. Being multifunctional, they serve to mainly inform, promote and persuade, with the focus on the construction of the organization's positive social image.

Oil companies are among the business organizations that face an increasing challenge to maintain their positive image due to many negative impacts of their operations on the environment, ranging from physical impacts of drilling for and distribution of oil and gas to high emissions of carbon dioxide by burning fossil fuels, contributing to climate change (Elliott 2003), risky deep-water drilling (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling 2011) and the danger of oil spills. With rising environmental consciousness among the public and with consumers pressing for environmentally friendly products and cleaner production processes (Elliott 2003, Alazzani

& Wan-Hussin 2013), oil companies are ever more confronted with the task of justifying their actions and gaining stakeholders' trust.

One of the major global oil companies that needs to defend itself from potentially adverse views is Beyond Petroleum (BP), formerly British Petroleum. Its reputation has been severely damaged owing to the company's responsibility for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, the largest accidental marine oil spill in U.S. history (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling 2011), which caused the deaths of eleven workers and immense ecological, economic and social devastation in the Gulf region (Barnshaw et al. 2012). BP's safety problems have been chronic (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling 2011), with a failure to implement adequate processes and safety measures leading to a number of other accidents, including the Texas City refinery explosion in 2005 and the Prudhoe Bay pipeline leak in 2006.

The aim of the present study is to examine how BP justifies and legitimizes itself and its actions and thus attempts to gain stakeholders' support via its official website. The focus is placed on the investigation of the main discursive identities and roles enacted by BP to construct a positive corporate image and on the exploration of the company's positioning with respect to the environment.

2   Methodological background

The corpus consists of data collected from the "About BP" section of the company's official website. The "About BP" section has been chosen since, in contrast to the more specialized focus and narrower range of addressees of the other sections (e.g. "Products and Services", "Investors" and "Careers"), it provides general information about the company aimed at a wide range of stakeholders and is mainly concerned with the construction of the company's identity. The website constitutes a multimodal genre, with the main modes of communication being verbal written text, visual communication (such as photographs, pictures, tables and graphs), and audio-visual communication (videos). The focus of the analysis is placed on the verbal text, with the other modes of communication representing supplementary data.

The methodology employed in the study is critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1993, Wodak 2002, Weiss & Wodak 2003, Wodak & Meyer 2009). Among the main goals of this approach are to examine the constructive effects of discourse and to investigate the links between language, power and ideology. The present study is concerned mainly with the interpersonal function of discourse (Halliday 1978, Fairclough 1992), i.e. with the construction of social identities for BP and social relationships between BP and the addressees.

Social identity is viewed as a relational phenomenon, interconnected with social relationships, based on Bucholtz and Hall's definition of identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (2005: 586). It stands for a complex, dynamic, multi-dimensional concept (Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard 2008, Lemke 2008), emerging in discourse rather than being fixed.

The construction of an organization's identity and its self-representation on the official website tend to aim at institutional legitimation. According to van Leeuwen, legitimation provides justifications of "the practices of specific institutional orders" (2007: 92). A key characteristic of organizations is their need to be considered socially legitimate (Vaara 2004) – in other words, to obtain approval from social actors, the motivation for which stems from the companies' goal to persuade consumers to buy their products and investors to invest in their shares, and thus make profit. To maintain legitimacy, companies' behaviour needs to be within the realm of what the wider society considers acceptable (Fuoli 2012). Therefore, companies are expected to respond to and reflect social changes, including a growing environmental consciousness.

One of the discursive strategies through which companies can justify themselves and persuade stakeholders of their positive image is framing. According to Entman (1993), framing involves the selection and foregrounding of certain aspects of reality, which consequently call forth a particular interpretation. Frames are materialized in discourse, for instance, by the inclusion and exclusion of particular keywords, phrases and syntactic structures.

3 Discursive identities of BP

The analysis of the framing of BP's actions and practices on the company's website reveals that BP justifies itself by enacting a number of different discursive roles that have in common the function of initiating addressees' positive evaluation of BP by appealing to social morals and values. The shifting among different discursive roles is accompanied by interdiscursivity, a term referring to hybrid texts that combine elements of varied orders of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 118); in other words, by adopting "established conventions or resources associated with other genres and practices" (Bhatia 2010: 25).

3.1 Discourse of indispensability

One of the discursive roles which serves as a legitimation of the company and the oil industry in general is the establishment of BP as an indispensable entity (cf. Breeze 2012). The rhetoric of necessity is employed in the following examples: *we produce **essential** sources of energy, turning them into products that people **need**; the supply of products **fundamental** to **everyday life** and our master*

brands help keep the world moving. The impact of this rhetoric is enhanced by BP's expression of a sense of urgency, and by the portrayal of its products and services as not being needed solely by local people; instead the rhetoric foregrounds the global reach of the company, as in *products and services people **around the world** need **right now***. An equal emphasis to the one on immediate necessity is placed on future demand for energy, which is represented as growing as a result of a growing population. This future-orientation is also revealed in the repeatedly used expression 'long-term', as in *a long-term commitment, long-term projects, long-term relationships, long-term research programmes* and *long-term value*. BP thus constructs itself as a company that not only plays an essential role in the present but also has an important place in the future, which constitutes a persuasive message for investors.

In justifying the use of oil and gas by citing a growing demand for energy (*new sources of oil and gas needed to help meet the world's growing demand for energy*), BP adopts a cosmological rhetorical strategy, explaining its actions by the emphasis on their "inevitability because of forces beyond the agency of immediate actors" (Suddaby & Greenwood 2005: 55); this effectively strips the company of responsibility. At the same time, such a strategy obscures alternative viewpoints, including the replacement of oil and gas by alternative sources of energy or calls for a sharp change in lifestyle that would lead to the reduction of consumption and thus also lesser demand for energy, as advocated by environmentalists (Elliott 2003 and Casas 2014).

3.2 Other-orientation

Another key discursive role that helps to construct a positive image of BP is that of philanthropist and benefactor. BP portrays itself as being actively engaged in improving the well-being of other people, foregrounding the company's donation of money to different sectors of society and thus cultivating the company's goodwill. For instance, it points out its sponsorship of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Example 1), UK arts and culture (Example 2) and education in the countries where it operates (Example 3). The force of the utterance is enhanced by the rhetoric of necessity and a superlative in Example 1, the adjective *major* positively qualifying the noun *supporter* and a time reference establishing a long tradition of the support in Example 2, and the selection of the word *joy*, dispelling doubts about the calculated intentions of BP's help, in Example 3.

(1)   *We work with the USOC to provide America's athletes – Olympians and Paralympians alike – with the support and resources they need to compete at the highest level.*

(2)   *BP is a major supporter of UK arts with a programme that has spanned over 35 years*.

(3)   *BP learns the joy of encouraging education*.

Since arts and culture, education and sport are considered to be among the pillars of a developed society, by emphasizing its support for these activities and thus appealing to community values, BP aims to win social acceptance and respect. As Bhatia points out, business organizations engage in philanthropic activities "in the hope that it will bring them community recognition and hence give them advantage over their competitors" (2010: 48). Furthermore, since sport is associated with a healthy lifestyle, by supporting it, BP implicitly designates healthiness as one of the company's important values.

BP generally frames its actions as benefiting others and contributing to the common good. It takes on a discursive role of a helper (cf. Breeze 2012), as illustrated in the following examples: *our projects and operations **help** to generate employment, investment and tax revenues in countries and communities around the world*; *BP's education programmes **help** children learn how energy works*; *BP **helped** the area cope with epidemic diseases and the problems of poor water quality*; *BP wants to **help** build a healthy, stable society*; and *BP **helps** young people get a head start on their futures*. The construction of the company as focused on other-orientation rather than self-interest is also materialized in the repeated references to BP's sharing of its knowledge and experience with others, as in *we share our skills and technologies with local businesses and academic institutions*. When a benefit to BP itself is mentioned, it is depicted as a mutual benefit to BP and another party/other parties (*we benefit as much as the local economy* and *communities* and *building mutually beneficial scientific relationships in China*). The depiction of BP as a business organization whose main aim is to make profit for corporate purposes is backgrounded.

The portrayal of BP as a non-individualistic organization is further enhanced by the ascribed role of a collaborator and a partner (cf. Examples 4 and 5).

(4)   *We form **enduring partnerships** in the countries in which we operate, building **strong relationships** with governments, customers, partners such as Rosneft, suppliers and communities to create mutual advantage. **Co-operation** helps unlock resources found in challenging locations and transforms them into products for our customers.*

(5)   *Our work with leading academic scientists and engineers provides long-term, large-scale **collaboration** on issues of fundamental science in energy and related fields.*

The focus on co-operation and collaboration with others fulfils two main functions: firstly, it partially disperses responsibility for BP's actions among other entities, and secondly, the association of BP with governments and universities, institutions that occupy a powerful and respectable position in society, is an effective legitimizing device.

3.3 Environmental friendliness

Despite being engaged in environmentally risky and damaging activities, BP enacts the identity of an environmentally conscious, responsible and protective company, as illustrated in Examples 6 and 7. It establishes environmental concern as its main aim: *we have a **single aim** – to identify and grow low-carbon businesses*. Such rhetoric follows the trend among corporations to employ an "environmentally protective ethos in order to offset the increased demand from the public for more effective regulation of environmentally sensitive industries" (Howlett & Raglon 2001: 246).

(6)   *We try to **minimize our environmental impact** from the earliest planning stages to the dismantling stage, and each day in between.*

(7)   *Whatever we do, wherever we do it, we always strive to **preserve and improve the surrounding environment**.*

As illustrated in Example 7, BP represents itself as not merely mitigating its environmental impact but also improving the environment. The positive force of Examples 6 and 7 is further intensified by several hyperbolic expressions, namely *each, whatever, wherever*, and *always*, which contribute to the propagandistic nature of the sentences. By contrast, references to the negative environmental effects of BP's actions employ mitigating or euphemistic expressions, as illustrated in Example 8, which uses the mitigating modal verb *can* and the euphemism *implications* for 'negative/damaging effects'.

(8)   *Oil and gas production projects **can** have **implications** for air, water and wildlife.*

BP's environmental consciousness is depicted as being instigated by BP's initiative itself rather than by government regulations or social pressure, as when the company employs a persuasive rhetoric of naturalness by stating that it has *a deep, natural passion for preserving the environment*. BP establishes itself as an advocate of a more environmentally-friendly future, being a source of inspiration for others, as shown in Example 9. Thus, the company represents itself not as a problem-causer but as a problem-solver, adopting a greenwashing rhetoric, i.e.

providing a biased portrayal of its products and practices as eco-friendly while backgrounding or omitting their negative environmental impact (Barnshaw et al. 2012).

(9)   *BP's London 2012 vision was to use the power of the Games to **inspire change** and to provide real solutions for a lower-carbon future.*

The construction of the environmentally positive image of BP is enhanced by non-verbal modes of communication, mainly the selection of colours, a logo and photographs. The prevailing colour on the website is green, symbolically standing for environmental friendliness, the image of which is intensified by the choice of a green and yellow sun/flower as a logo. The selected photographs of oil refineries consist of romanticized shots taken at sunset or at night, with lights on, and shots set in an idyllic scenery, with a blue clear sky, blue sea and mountains in the background. The overall impression is one of cleanliness and unspoiled natural beauty.

There are two means established by BP to ensure environmental sustainability: safety, as illustrated in Example 10, and advanced technology, as illustrated in Examples 11 and 12.

(10)   *We prioritize **the safety** and reliability of our operations to **protect** the welfare of our workforce and **the environment**.*
(11)   *These **advanced technologies** [...] will provide the assurance we need to reach areas of oil tens of kilometers (miles) away from a platform, minimising the infrastructure needed on the surface resulting in **safer, more environmentally friendly** operations.*
(12)   *Sugar to diesel is an **advanced biofuel technology** that will bring a **more environmentally friendly** renewable diesel.*

To gain back its lost reputation, BP foregrounds safety as the company's core value, increasing the persuasive force by the adoption of hyperbolic *every*- expressions, as in *a relentless focus on safety remains the top priority for **everyone** at BP* and *safety is at the heart of **everything** we do*. The word *safety* itself occurs (in different parts of speech) 97 times in the "About BP" section, promoting the image of the company as a responsible corporate citizen.

BP's advocacy of technology and scientific innovations as means to the enhancement of safety (*technology helps us to manage safety better in deepwater drilling and production*) and consequently environmental protection (*collaborations with [...] our state-of-the-art technology centres are driving*

improvements […] to deliver cleaner […] products) reflects the guiding principle of contemporary technological society – the belief that nature can be dominated (Chawla 2001). This line of thinking is a continuation of the Western Enlightenment ideology of the domination of human beings over nature through reason (*bringing the brightest minds together to develop advanced materials*). Such an approach has been criticized as fallacious since the use of technologies led to environmental degradation and climate change in the twentieth century (Norgaard 1994). As Gramling and Freudenburg note, through technology "our capacity to *do* damage, both to ourselves and to our environment, may well have risen faster than our capacity to *un*do the damage" (2012: 66).

A complementary type of rhetoric employed by BP is the rhetoric of progress, as when BP states that it aims for continuous improvements in efficiency, continued improvements in technology, continual innovations and continued growth in operating cash. The belief in never-ending progress, deeply ingrained in Western thinking since the sixteenth century (Norgaard 1994), is considered by Halliday (2001) to constitute an ideological threat. Gramling and Freudenburg note that "industrial development often proceeds at a pace that outstrips the ability to control unanticipated consequences" (2012: 66). As a result, the correlation between technological and cultural progress is questionable (Norgaard 1994).

3.4 Respect enhancement

To enhance respectability, BP enacts discursive roles generally holding a higher social esteem than a commercial company does, namely the roles of an explorer, a discoverer and a researcher, which allow BP to stand for expertise, accomplishment and exceptionality. The company designates itself as *a great explorer*, with a reputation which *is based on decades of experience in discovering new sources of oil and gas*, and foregrounds its research collaborations *with major universities and research institutions around the world*, stating that the company and its academic partners *research, develop and deploy a wide range of technologies, processes and techniques*.

Another discursive position by which BP builds respect for itself from stakeholders is the role of a mentor and an educator. The company provides long explanatory accounts of the formation of oil and gas, its operations and the workings of the technologies that it employs, alternating between a formal, detached, scientific style, characterized by high information density and specialized vocabulary (Pérez-Llantada 2012), as can be seen in Example 13, and a more informal, personal, dialogic style, illustrated in Example 14. The alternation between the two styles allows BP to, on the one hand, prove expertise, and, on the other hand, appeal to a wider audience and enter into a relationship

with readers. At the same time, the ascription of inherently asymmetric discursive identities (BP as an educator to BP and the addressees as those to be educated) endows the company with power over the recipients.

(13) *Ocean Bottom Nodes are pressurized cylinders, placed on the seabed, that contain recording equipment which detect vibrations. [...] The nodes detect the sound waves reflected from the rocks below the seabed from any direction, to provide high-quality wide azimuth data to help optimise production from the reservoir.*

(14) *Why are oil and natural gas so difficult to locate? The best way to answer this is to look at how oil and gas came into being in the first place. [...] If you've ridden in a car or bus, fossils got you where you needed to go.*

3.4 An American dream story

When describing the company's history, BP enacts the role of an American dream achiever, eliciting sympathy and admiration from addressees. The account of BP's history is framed as a story of a company that had to face a number of difficulties at the beginning, as illustrated in Examples 15 and 16, but, through hard work, perseverance (*giving up was not part of George Reynolds's* [the first company explorer's] *character*) and the ability to overcome obstacles, reached success, as shown in Example 17. The success of BP is thus established as a result of a long, hard journey full of effort; a portrayal more likely to gain social approval and respect than if the success was depicted as having been achieved effortlessly.

(15) *To find oil in Persia, George Reynolds and his caravan of explorers had lived through seven years of harsh heat, gastric illnesses and disappointments.*

(16) *By 1914 the Anglo-Persian project was nearly bankrupt for the second time in its short history. The company had plenty of oil but no one to sell it to.*

(17) *From that first, uncertain search for oil in Persia, BP had grown to become a global energy company.*

4 Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the website of one of the world's major oil companies Beyond Petroleum has revealed that the company enacts multiple positive discursive roles, constructing a corresponding variety of positive social identities for itself. The website constitutes a hybrid text, employing conventions of different orders of discourse, including promotional, ecological, educational, scientific and storytelling discourse. Among the main discursive roles that BP fulfils are the roles of an indispensable organization, a philanthropist, a

benefactor, an environmentally conscious and protective company, an explorer, a researcher, an educator and an American dream achiever. Through these subject positions, BP justifies its existence and defends itself from potentially adverse public reactions resulting from rising environmental consciousness in society and the company's responsibility for a number of accidents, including the largest accidental marine oil spill in the history of the United States. The appropriation of the discursive roles allows for the construction of BP's positive corporate image by establishing the company as standing for higher social and moral values, including altruism, other-orientation, helpfulness, co-operation, environmental awareness, perseverance and knowledge. This legitimizing strategy of moral evaluation (van Leeuwen 2007) diverts attention from the fact that BP is a commercial company, among whose main aims is to make a profit and some of whose actions have a negative impact on the environment.

BP provides a biased portrayal of the impact of the company's operations on the environment, employing manipulative greenwashing rhetoric in an attempt to alter public opinions to its advantage. The extraction of oil and gas is justified by the employment of the rhetoric of necessity and indispensability, representing the growing demand for energy as an inevitable fact. Negative effects of the company's activities on the environment are mitigated and downplayed. The focus is placed on the construction of BP as an environmentally friendly company, among whose key goals are environmental sustainability and preservation, aligning BP with the popular environmental concerns of society.

BP's discourse on environmental sustainability adopts the Western Enlightenment ideology of superiority of humans, namely science and technology, over nature. By employing the rhetoric of progress, BP proclaims the protection of the environment through scientific and technological innovations, continuing the line of thinking that nature can be dominated – an ideology that has had an uncontrollable impact on the environment in the last centuries (Chawla 2001). In contrast to environmentalists' viewpoints, calling for a rethinking of the human-nature relationship, emphasizing the inseparability of society and nature, and advocating a complete replacement of fossil fuels by alternative sources of energy and a radical change in lifestyle promoting a decrease in consumption, BP adopts the view of human beings as dominant forces, serving well the profit-making purpose of an oil corporation.

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