Constructing and Deconstructing an Environmental Threat

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Is the natural environment real or socially constructed? That is a presumptuous question to ask, but it is a great one if you want to draw in your reader. In short, our perception of the environment needs to be sufficiently accurate for our species to survive a process of natural selection–meaning that our immediate physical environment do probably exists independent of us in a fashion akin to how we perceive it (Hoffman et al., 2015). The further we venture from our immediate environment in our inquiries however, the more we need to rely on the perception of others, who co-construct with us a larger picture of our environment. Even if we were to travel far and wide, we simply could not observe by ourselves all the details of all the various ecosystems, from the trees and animals herds down to microbes and microplastics. Even less could we hope to monitor them over time without the help of others. Some of the greatest collectives on earth are dedicated to this task of observing earth, such as NASA and the science community NASA cooperates with.

In our quest to understand the world, we encounter those that agree with us, and–if we look well enough–those who do not agree with us. In order to create an encompassing, widely accepted understanding we need to create a model that can accommodate diverging views with more elegance than just stating "this side is wrong and that side is right". In particular, it may be tempting to disregard the opinion of those who do not have a good stewardship of nature in mind. But ignoring a person does not change the fact that the person exists[1], and that their actions have an impact on our environment–and often a more significant one than we do. In this work, I conduct a deep dive into one environmental phenomenon, to obtain a more encompassing view into the social processes involved.

One of the actors in this quest is nature itself. The title already gives away that I look at the construction and deconstruction of an environmental threat. That implies that it is in man's[2] power to make an environmental threat appear and disappear. However, that is not the full story. As long as the threat is

[1] Some might argue that that is unless you get everybody in society to agree to this–see homelessness.

[2] Something, something, most people in the industry being male etc.

speculative, it does hold true. But every now and then, the speculative threat manifests in an actual environmental pollution event. When that happens, an army of men[2] descends upon the site of the environmental damage and spins more than an Olympic figure skater. But for a limited period of time–while the police sets up their barriers and tells you that there is nothing to see there–it is there, for everybody to see. And the general public will see it–whether it is oil in their backyard, a river on fire, or maybe an explosion that kills three.[3]

- I am very happy with this introductory paragraph. It introduces three things very effectively:

  The social nature of (our mental image of the) extended environment

  The sometimes deliberate nature of this social process

  The dialectic nature of this relationship

- One thing is still missing, which is how well March fits into this:

  March's political view of organizations would fit quite nicely, except that it is here the scope is bigger–the same process happens on a smaller scale, too, but on a bigger scale it becomes more salient

  Validity is of course also relevant, which may be where the actual contribution lies

Deconstructing an environmental threat

Approach

- Only demonstrate deconstruction

  Equivalent to construction of pipelines as safe

  Equivalent to statement of healthy, unaffected nature

- Focus on industrial side of action
- Deliberately one-sided view
- Using greenwashing terminology
- Contribution: Greenwashing as a discourse strategy

  Specific acts of greenwashing

  Cataloging different kinds of greenwashing

  Greenwashing at different levels

- Contrasting claims and industry/organizational trajectories

[3] In a similar vain, but on a different analytical level, Berger and Luckmann spoke of the "dialectic between nature and society" (1966, p. 201).

Data points–events

- Keystone XL permit application (Stansbury, 2011)
- AOPL project to advertise pipelines as safe
- EPA environmental restoration projects
- ALEC anti-protest laws & attack on legitimacy of anti-pipeline protesters
- Spending rhetorics–pipeline safety spendings on pipeline extensions
- Pipeline technology
- Escalation through use of police, private security, & national guard
- Astroturfing

Contribution

Introduce the various industry projects as more than just initiatives to disseminate information. The "information dissemination"-premise suggests that recipients receive information from various sources and when they are due to make a decision, they search out more information to be considered in the decision-making process. That view would be in line with rational models of decision making. For instance, a politician might consult environmental data, too, and conduct a critical examination of the information that he[2] has received before.

What makes a greenwashing strategy so insidious and effective is the model of decision making that it suggests. Many of the information provided in a greenwashing campaign are often "harmless", as in easy to debunk through independent research. But when an alternative model of decision making is considered, a disinformation campaign suddenly appears quite effective. In this model, the decision maker has already formed his opinion on a matter when he[2] is called upon to make a decision. Any new arriving information then is compared with the existing information, and when the decision maker encounters information that contradict previous information, he can either decide to invalidate those information–e.g., based on the sender–*or* reconsider the already formed opinion.

Epistemic communities

Organizational theory and management research often pride themselves with being at the intersection of research and practice, while at the same time bemoaning–or taking refuge behind–the researcher-practitioner gap when asked about making positive contributions to practice (Kieser et al., 2015). Researchers *want* to help practitioners to make better decisions, but they *don't want* to be tethered to "people who seem mentally challenged when reading

the Harvard Business Review" (McKelvey, 2006, p. 823). Their solution is to find mechanisms in the data that take over the task for researchers, to find rationality–or more recently bounded rationality–in the world.

Examples of the search for rationality or bounded rationality in the wild include the *theory of the firm*, *transaction costs*, and the broader literature on *dynamic capabilities*. That is not an exhaustive list–almost every contemporary article in the literature is showcasing a mechanism toward performance improvements, or some other kind of desirable organizational outcome. In other words, management research is telling practitioners "keep doing what you are doing, you are already doing pretty well", while actively looking for empirical evidence for that hypothesis. That is concerning, when there are other models of the world which highlight the counterforces that exist (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). These are models that gnaw at the primacy of rationality and bounded rationality in organizational processes and that our findings should be weighted against. Is selection pressure really a sufficient force to bring about all the hypothesized processes? How does selection pressure fare against organizational discontinuities in practice and personnel and other organizational or meta-organizational processes?

Further

- Pivot to epistemic communities

  As a model to see shortcomings

  As a model to see the construction of a (seemingly) rational reality

  As a way to experience the world like practitioners do

  As a way to get an elevated perspective

  In the end, can still analyze the merit of different views

Problem

- How to integrate this with purpose of showcasing contestation, competing epistemologies

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