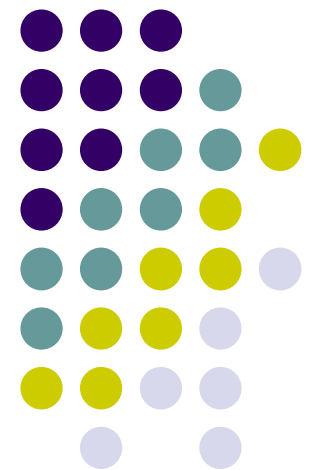
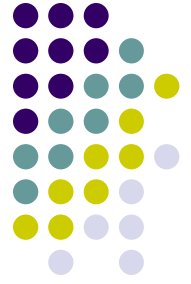


The hybrid nature of CSR discourse: how do Bel20 corporations legitimize their CSR ?

Emmanuelle Michotte

Teaching assistant & research fellow
Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management
Centre de Sociologie des Organisations
Institut de Sociologie
Université Libre de Bruxelles
emmanuelle.michotte@ulb.ac.be





Presentation planning

1. Preamble
2. Introduction & research question
3. CSR: a social construction
4. Discourse analysis: results
5. Discussion & perspectives
6. Limits of the present research





Preamble

- **Preamble**
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- Discussion
- Limits

« Le sociologue comme chasseur de mythes. »

Norbert Elias, *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie*, 1970: 55.

« [...] un régime qui n'offre pas aux êtres humains de raisons profondes de veiller les uns sur les autres ne saurait durablement conserver sa légitimité. »

Richard Sennett, *Le travail sans qualités*, 2000 : 210.

Introduction & research question



- Preamble
- **Introduction**
- Social construction
- Results
- Discussion
- Limits

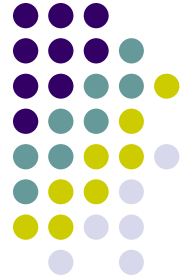
- The idea of CSR is not easy to grasp.
 - Different understandings
 - Different normative approaches
- CSR actions are taken everyday, one of them is to create and spread discourses.
- According to the literature, corporations are responding to their stakeholders, but also to criticism.
- How do they respond to these through CSR discourses?



CSR: a social construction

- Preamble
- Introduction
- **Social construction**
- Results
- Discussion
- Limits

- Social construction = « if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences » (Thomas theorem, 1928)
- Language = the royal mean to “objectivise” subjective views. The big issue is the institutionalisation and legitimization of “a” reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)
- Studying CSR as a social construction entails “a *deep analysis of the use of language with a focus on how it has been shaped, when and where, and by whom*” (Critical discourse analysis - Fairclough, 1995-2005)



- Preamble
- Introduction
- **Social construction**
- Results
- Discussion
- Limits

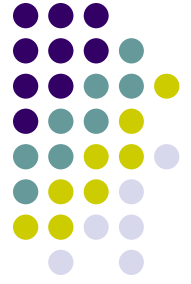
- Burchell & Cook (2006): it is a mistake to believe that the CSR discourse is entirely the realm of the business community; sustainable development and CSR discourses are highly « hybrid ».
 - *“Companies must constantly cope with the criticism and try to respond in a situation of ‘resistance’.” (2006: 126)*
 - *“This struggle for domination, which is also a process of resistance, is to find in the hybridisation of discourse.” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 15)*
- Do we find this “hybridity” among the CSR discourses of the Bel20 index companies?



- Preamble
- Introduction
- **Social construction**
- Results
- Discussion
- Limits

- Companies need to justify their CSR subjective view in order to convince other groups of actors that their view is « the » reality.
- Conceptual tools : the « orders of worth » proposed by Luc Boltanski & Laurent Thévenot (1991).
 - In situation of dispute, actors need to justify their action through the use of a principle of worth, which refers to a « world ».
- There are six « worlds », i.e. six justification orders based on different coherent systems of values.
- Compromises between these are possible, but are by nature local and fragile.
- Our hypothesis: despite the produced paradoxes, hybrid CSR discourse refers to different worlds.





Discourse analysis: the results

- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- Methodology:
 - qualitative
 - content analysis
 - no attempt to generalize (next step)
 - attempt to “test” the idea of hybridity
- Sample: Bel20 index companies in 2007 & 2008, 18 of these communicate on CSR (annual reports, CSR reports, websites).



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

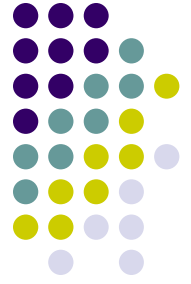
- The Civic World

- Higher common principle: the pre-eminence of the collective and the general interest.
- Worthy beings: the masses and the collectives.
- The individual must renounce its immediate interests and act in line with the general interest (collective action, commitment for a just cause in a social movement,...).
- *Corporate citizenship* : most representative expression
 - Commitment for causes like climate change, health issues, etc.
 - References to international standards, as the Charter of Human Rights or the Kyoto Protocol.
 - Companies talk about themselves as an integral part of society as any other citizen.



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- « *The requirement for a sustainable form of development involves us all. It is only by combining our efforts that we will be able to provide a response to the magnitude of the current threat to our resources, our ecosystems and our societies. Regardless, our lifestyles will change. Such is the reality we need to prepare ourselves for.* » (Suez)

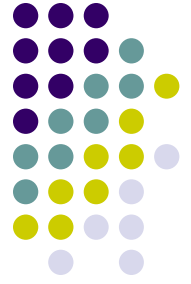


- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- **The Industrial World**

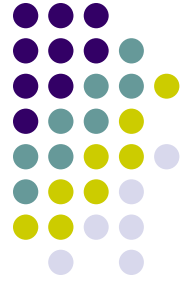
- Higher common principle: the efficiency or performance.
- Worthy being: the efficient and productive, mostly expressed in the « expert ».
- Besides a commitment, results are expected:
 - Reporting with figures and statistics functioning as « evidences » of the effectiveness of the CSR performance of the company
 - Performance is a matter of control: regular checks, audits by experts, indicators, standards (GRI, ISO, ...).





- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- *Total water consumption decreased by 8,9% compared to 2006. Cooling water consumption went down by 14%. » (Agfa-Gevart).*
- *In 2006, we carried out 174 audits. This means that we have screened every one of our toy suppliers. A number of companies where infringements were found have been given a follow-up audit. During the five years since the launching of this initiative we found very few case of child labour. » (Colruyt).*



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- **The World of Renown**

- Higher common principle: the opinion of others
- Worthy being: the one who is deemed, known, recognized by others.
- Commitments and efficiency are not sufficient: companies need to be recognized, i.e. legitimized by others in order to win public esteem.
 - Awards, certifications, labels, ...
 - ... given by “legitimate” actors: NGO’s, independent control agencies, governments, universities,...





- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- *Fortis has been recognised on many occasions for its work in this area, most recently being named Best Carbon Trader (Fortis)*

- *In Belgium in 2007 Bekaert was awarded « top employer 2008» status by CRF International, an independent human resources research organization » (Bekaert).*





- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- The Market World

- Higher common principle: competition
- Worthy being: the one who is desirable, has value, the rich person.
- Individuals pursue their own immediate interests.
- CSR is a mean to make the difference between a company and its competitors, to seduce consumers, shareholders, banks, i.e. the capital in a broad sense, and to create value.
 - Words like “leader”, “best in class”, “pioneer” are usually used.
 - Rankings are highly appreciated, especially when they allow to join investment funds.





- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- *« Our capacity for innovation and our pioneering role will enable us to create new products and services fairly quickly to meet the environmental and social expectations of our customers. » (Dexia)*
- *« We are member of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. We are part of the FTSE4Good Index, have been awarded as « best in class » rating by Storebrand Socially Responsible Investments and are part of the Kempen/SNS Smaller Europe SRI Index. » (Umicore)*

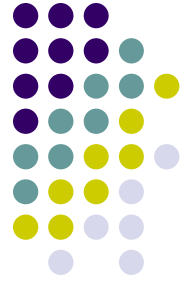


Coexistence of different worlds and social construction of a coherent system of justification



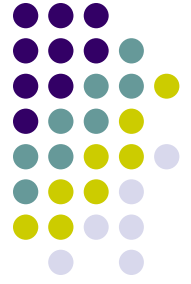
- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- Using elements of grammar from different worlds → paradoxes
- The most prominent: how can it be possible to pursue, at the same time, immediate interests (economic goals, individual liberties) and general interests (social and environmental goals, social justice)?
- Most companies do not mention the idea of an opposition. On the contrary, they implicitly minimize the possibility of conflicting values.
 - CSR is progressively incorporated in the global strategy, in the core values, etc.



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- Further, we observe a semantic shift: from sustainable development to sustainable growth, from CSR to responsible management or marketing
 - “*These are the forces driving our pursuit of Bekaert’s strategic objective: sustainable profitable growth.*” (Bekaert)
 - “*Sustainable growth and the survival of industrial companies require investment and a long-term approach to management and risk-taking*” (Solvay)



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- **Results**
- Discussion
- Limits

- Corporations promote also the idea that creating value serves the interests of all stakeholders, not only the shareholders.
- Very few companies openly deny the opposition between the pursuit of collective and immediate individual interests at the same time. In this case, they present CSR as an economic or a management tool.
 - *“We see no contradiction in our determination to be a successful business and a socially-responsible business. CSR and business objectives are complementary not contrary. CSR is a way of improving not the just the business, but also the way we do business.” (Belgacom)*

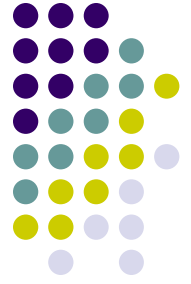




Discussion and perspectives

- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- **Discussion**
- Limits

- With CSR, the language and values of stakeholders and criticism are appropriated by corporations.
- Companies deploy a justification system without ever betraying their “raison d’être”, to create value for their shareholders.
- Further, they legitimize the pursuit of economic growth as a socially and environmentally responsible goal.



- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- **Discussion**
- Limits

- Facing the criticism that they are not socially responsible, companies declare that they are committed in large global causes and claim the status of citizens (Civic World).
- Facing the criticism that these commitments are empty rhetoric, they need to measure their CSR performance and submit it to external experts (Industrial World).
- To win public esteem and a positive image, their CSR has to be recognized by “legitimate” actors (World of Renown).
- CSR is a fruitful tool to join investments funds, to attract consumers, and to make the difference with competitors (Market World).
- This justification system is presented as something very coherent, logical, evident.
- Criticism is a real opportunity for companies, when they listen to it.

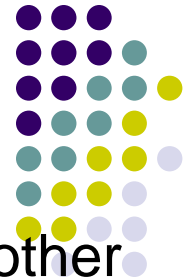




- This phenomenon of “recuperation of the criticism” is nothing new! (Boltanski-Chiapello, 1999)
 - ‘68-’73: companies, and the capitalist ideology in general, are facing powerful waves of criticism, not only from external actors, but also from internal actors, especially the management staff and the middle class.
 - Companies did respond to this by the appropriation of one part of the criticism, the one asking for more autonomy and less alienation (artistic criticism).
 - ’80-’90: flexibility and responsible autonomy are coming up, people work on “projects” in “networks” (the seventh order of worth).
 - At the same time, criticism weakened, capitalism has historically never been so fruitful, but the households’ economic situation worsened: more unemployment, stagnating wages, more social inequality, ...

- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- **Discussion**
- Limits





- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- **Discussion**
- Limits

- Corporations are political organizations, as any other organization (Courpasson, 2001).
- Are we today observing the same phenomenon? Because the capitalist ideology is facing a revival of the ecological and conservative criticism (Chiapello, 2009), do corporations have to integrate a part of the criticism in order to survive?
- Is CSR the symptom of this recuperation?
- If yes, does it mean that the capitalist ideology is redeploying, changing, evolving or collapsing?
- How will corporations respond to the rising anti-growth campaigns?





Limits of the present research

- Preamble
- Introduction
- Social construction
- Results
- Discussion
- **Limits**

- Necessity to “test” this model with a larger and more international sample – work in progress.
- Need to use a statistical software - Lexico3 – work in progress.
- Need to dress the historical evolution of these justification system- work in progress
- Need to generalize, but also to go deeper in details.
- Need to conduct interviews with actors (social movements) who criticize corporations and the capitalist ideology, in order to see to what extent the CSR discourse can satisfy them.
- Need to see how this justification system finds a place at several levels (within the firm, between firms, between firms and government, ...). Is this justification system present everywhere, with everyone, or do we find variations? Exceptions?





Thank you!

Question time

