

# Talking Green in the Public Sphere

## *Press Releases, Corporate Voices and the Environment*

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### **Abstract**

In a climate of growing public concern and monitoring of business's impact on the environment, corporations and industry groups have developed increasingly sophisticated strategies to manage their environmental reputation and to influence the outcome of environmental debates in the public sphere. In this article, we provide an exploratory overview of how the largest Swedish corporations selectively subsidise environmental news-making by supplying it with promotional materials disguised as journalistic copy. We analyse a year's worth of public relations output from the largest 15 companies traded in the Stockholm exchange or owned by the Swedish state, in order to shed light on the environmental themes they cover, the techniques they adopt to maximise the likelihood of media coverage and the evidence they provide to support their claims. Our analysis shows that corporate voices make substantial use of environmental and ecological arguments in their strategic communication, but they provide little useful information about the company's impact and do not usually foster forms of dialogic stakeholder engagement.

**Keywords:** corporate discourse, corporate social responsibility, environment, press releases, public relations, sustainability

### **Introduction**

Over the last quarter of the 20th century, a number of anthropogenic environmental catastrophes have raised widespread public concern about the effects of business and industrial activities on the long-term balance of the natural environment (Cho and Roberts 2010). Driven by heightened public scrutiny and sustained opposition from environmental interest groups, companies have developed sophisticated strategies to provide information and assessment of their environmental performance (Lehtimäki, Kujala and Heikkinen 2011). Corporate reports increasingly complement their financial disclosures with sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility sections that report on social and environmental metrics.

However, both journalists and the public tend to regard these disclosures as self-serving and biased, and their impact on public perceptions of the company is seldom significant (Bell 1991: 58; DeLorme and Fedler 2003: 99). In order to successfully project an organisational identity committed to environmental preservation and sustainable development (Lischinsky 2011), companies resort to a variety of more indirect strategies, from environmentally-themed advertising to external certification and sponsorship of environmental causes (Hansen and Machin 2008; Cox 2006).

To lend them credibility and impact, environmental claims can be circulated through a seemingly independent source (Kolk 2008; Hansen 2010: 70). Business corporations and industry groups have the economic resources to fund public relations (PR) and news management initiatives that environmental pressure groups are not in a position to match (Hansen 2010: 73; 2011). Media organisations, faced with radical cuts of newsroom resources (Franklin 2008; Nygren 2008), are increasingly dependent on the ‘information subsidy’ that comes from PR sources in the form of press releases.

Companies influence the tone and focus of the news-making process by providing newsrooms with promotional copy disguised to resemble journalistic writing (Jacobs et al. 2008). Particularly in special interest beats such as environmental news, which seldom have a specialist reporter assigned, press releases are often simply republished as news (Erjavec 2004; Pander Maat 2007). We argue that, under these conditions, there is a great risk that public communication about the commons is harnessed to the strategic pursuit of private interests: environmental problems arising from the exploitation of natural resources affecting generations to come are subordinated to the short-term financial interests of business.

Earlier research on the communication strategies of sources and on source-journalist relationships has shown that successful claims-making is strongly linked to economic and organizational resources and political power. As ‘communicative ‘power’ in society is deeply unequally distributed’ (Hansen 2011: 20), studies in environmental communication need to take the ideological nature of public communication as their point of departure. In this paper, our purpose is to analyse how the largest Swedish corporations subsidise the news-making process via press releases in order to influence public understanding of their behaviour and environmental impact. We examine these corporations’ environmentally themed press releases over a period of a year, providing a systematic description of the environmental themes they cover, the techniques corporations adopt to maximise the likelihood of media coverage and the evidence they provide to support their claims.

The following section presents a brief overview of prior research, focusing on the expanding role of press releases and other PR techniques in the corporate management of debates in the public sphere. Section 3 describes the materials, methods and software applications employed in the analysis. In Section 4, we present the main results and discuss the different topics and tactics used by corporations in these press releases with the goal of influencing policy and public opinion. We conclude by discussing the implications of these strategies for genuine organisation-stakeholder engagement on environmental issues.

## **Prior Research**

### *Environmental Issues and Corporate Discourse*

Many scholars have noted the particular difficulties that environmental problems face in becoming part of public debates (Djerf-Pierre 1996; Anderson 1997; Hansen 2011). Climate change, resource depletion or biodiversity loss may have pervasive and long-lasting effects, but they lack the suddenness, unexpectedness and unambiguity that makes public attention coalesce around an issue. The development and dynamics of a social issue are shaped by the range and nature of the voices engaged in making claims about

it (Anderson 1997; Hansen 2010). Most research on the construction of environmental problems has focused on the strategies of environmental pressure groups. However, studies of media coverage show that it is public authorities, government representatives, independent scientists and business who are most frequently quoted in regard to these issues (Hansen 2010: 56-73).

The voice of business and industry has become increasingly prominent in environmental debates, although it remains under-researched. From actively confronting environmentalist organizations in the 1960s, the business world has shifted to broadly espousing environmental responsibility and publicly exhibiting its commitment to the sustainability cause (Ihlén 2009: 246). This particular view, often conceptualised as “ecological modernization” (Hajer 1995), argues that improved environmental performance by corporations leads to better reputation, increased profits and opportunities for long-term growth in a “win-win” situation (Gray and Milne 2002: 69). While initially environmental disclosures were mainly driven by the need to comply with increased regulatory requirements, the argument that explicit communication about environmental performance would provide the company with a competitive advantage led to a more proactive approach, and to the provision of a broader range of public information (Jose and Lee 2006: 308). At the same time, it led to a marked promotionalisation of corporate environmental communications.

The practice of cultivating a favourable environmental reputation without substantially addressing the underlying issues is often called “greenwashing” (Laufer 2003). Environmental claims in advertising, for example, often promote as a benefit what is no more than bare compliance with legal requirements (Peattie and Crane 2005: 363). Thus, audiences are invited to save the world by consuming “green” products, with little regard to the actual sustainability of such a consumption system (Rice *et al.* 2012; Hansen and Machin 2008). Such greenwashing strategies have met considerable criticism from activist organisations and pressure groups, and a range of campaigns seek to expose misleading environmental marketing and PR.

### *Environmental PR and the Media System*

A way to bypass audiences’ distrust of corporate environmental claims is to attribute them to an independent source (Kolk 2008; Hansen 2010). Such methods have been employed in the climate change debate to dispute a current scientific consensus that challenges industry practices (McKie and Galloway 2007: 371; Greenberg *et al.* 2011).

Although journalists for long have been well aware of the promotional purpose of PR and organisational communication (Bell 1991: 58), and generally regard them as “unethical, manipulative, one-sided, and deceptive” (DeLorme and Fedler 2003: 99), the dynamics of news-gathering often makes them reliant on such materials. Turk (1986: 23–24) found that up to 84% of the stories disseminated by an organisation can find their way to the newspapers, and in special-interest topics press releases are often republished almost without change (Erjavec 2004; Pander Maat 2007). The environmental beat in particular seems highly permeable to such subsidies, tending to rely on low-cost, high-availability sources (Griffin and Dunwoody 1995).

The contemporary newsroom requires journalists to work across media platforms and operate on an online-first basis, increasing the range and complexity of the copy

that must be produced, and greatly reducing the time allotted for information gathering and fact-checking before publication (Franklin 2008: 635). As it would be too costly to fill this ever-widening “news hole” with original investigative journalism (Walters and Walters 1996: 167), sources that can offer media organisations an “information subsidy” in the form of publication-ready copy often get it republished as news with little alteration (Gandy Jr. 1980: 103). Promotional messages are thus passed off as objective reporting. Because of this, subsidising news-making is an important part of corporate strategies to influence the public sphere (Hansen 2010: 69).

Press releases – brief documents designed to follow the outward norms of journalistic prose and sent to the media for dissemination – are one of the main forms of this subsidy. Jacobs (1999a) showed how press releases adopt in advance the style and structure of news reporting to elicit minimal editing in the newsroom: they are written from a third-person perspective, frame future events as already past (Jacobs 1999b: 228), and follow the “inverted pyramid” informational pattern of hard news (Catenaccio 2008: 23).

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper seeks to explore how the environmental news-making process is subsidised in the Swedish media system. Given the importance of media coverage in setting the tone and focus of public debates about the environment (Griffin and Dunwoody 1995; Hansen 1991), we examine the efforts of big business to shape the news through an analysis of the press releases issued by the 15 largest Swedish corporations in 2008–9. Our goal is to provide an exploratory overview of the kind of environmental issues and events that are presented as newsworthy by corporate public relations sources.

The corpus collected for this project comprises all press releases issued during a period of a year (from July 2008 to June 2009) by the 15 largest Swedish companies, defined as those traded in OMX, the Stockholm stock exchange, or owned by the Swedish state. Table 1 contains a complete list of the selected organisations. This sample represents a variety of industrial and retail sectors – including some of high environmental sensitivity, such as energy production (Vattenfall), paper manufacturing (SCA and StoraEnso) and the biomedical industries (AstraZeneca) – and comprises mostly companies operating in the global market.

All the organisations in the sample maintain an online archive of their official communications, including press releases. Automated queries were based to identify releases employing environmental or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)-related terminology, including [hållbar] ‘sustainable’, ‘sustainability; [miljö] ‘environment’, ‘environmental’; [ekologi] ‘ecology’, ‘ecological’ and [klimat] ‘climate’. Matching documents were retrieved from the companies’ websites and digitally stored.

The texts were loaded into the text analysis tool Dedoose (Lieber and Weisner 2010), a web-based platform that supports document annotation, excerpt selection, structured coding and a variety of mixed-method tools for the analysis of patterns in codes and document attributes. Metadata, including source and date, were added to each document, and the two researchers independently conducted simultaneous coding.

We operationalised the topic of the press release as the newsworthy macroproposition announced in the headline and developed in the first two paragraphs of the text, which in the inverted pyramid style contain the information regarded as most important (cf. van Dijk

**Table 1.** *Companies and their PR Output*

Company	Press Releases	Words
ABB	25	15,705
AstraZeneca	8	5,605
Atlas Copco	10	3,785
ElectroLux	5	2,798
Ericsson	4	14,330
H&M	3	2,188
ICA	6	2,232
IKEA	12	3,934
Sandvik	1	3,193
SCA	7	3,608
Skanska	21	9,106
Stora Enso	7	5,824
Telia Sonera	5	3,506
Vattenfall	133	38,461
Volvo	28	10,940
Total	275	125,216

1985: 84). The list of codes was developed in a data-driven fashion, with new codes being added until saturation was reached. This method for text analysis has similarities with traditional techniques developed within quantitative content analysis (Berelson 1952), and was used in order to provide an overview of the kind of issues and events that corporate public relations sources regards as newsworthy. Cases of ambiguity were resolved by discussion between the researchers. The final codebook, presented in Table 2, contains 34 categories. Post-hoc comparisons with other text-analytic work shows remarkable similarities with the coding schemes discussed by Milne and Adler (1999: 240–2).

The 34 categories or codes were collapsed in six broad groups of newsworthy topics: environmental or social campaigns, economic growth, technical improvements to products and processes, certifications and awards, changes in organisational governance, and other issues such as environmental policy or regulatory change. Apart from coding the main topic of the press release, we looked at what kind of evidence was incorporated. The structure of the press releases was also annotated; codes were used to indicate the headline, the lead, and any verbatim quotes. Finally, the evidence provided to support the main topic of the press release -whether quantitative or qualitative – was tagged as well.

## Results

During the period under investigation, the 15 corporations examined in this project issued a total of 1308 press releases. Filtering by keywords resulted in a corpus of 330 documents. After digital retrieval, each of these was scanned to identify false positives (i.e., texts in which the keyword was used only in a sense unrelated to the project, such as [miljö] to mean ‘milieu, setting’). 55 documents were excluded by this process, yielding a final sample of 275 documents, with a total of 125’216 word-tokens.

**Table 2.** Coded Groups of Newsworthy Topics

Economic growth	Organisational governance	Technical improvements	Certification/ awards	Environmental and social campaigns	Other issues
Acquisition	Appointment	Process upgrade	Certification to product/ process	Environmental campaign	Policy/regulation
Company product used	Partnership	Factory upgrade	Test passed	Information campaign	Legal case/ ruling
Financial market	Voting stock changes	Product launch	Inclusion in index	CSR report	Policy advice
New plant		Resource use	Award to company	Exhibition	Anniversary
Operations stop/ withdrawal				Financial report	
Product sale				Meeting/Visit to the company	
Service sale				Press conference	
				Response to criticism	
				Talk/conference	
				Prize from company	
				Research conducted/published	
				Social campaign	
				Charitable event	
				Education	
				Health initiative	

From these figures we can gain a rough indication of the prominence of environmental issues within the public relations output of the top 15 Swedish corporations: about one in five (21%) press releases issued in a year contains at least one reference to environmental topics. However, there is considerable variation within the sample. In terms of overall volume, the output observed ranges from one environmentally-themed release (Sandvik) to a total of 133 (Vattenfall) in a one-year period. In terms of the percentage of public relations output that touches upon environmental topics, figures range from the almost negligible (3.7%, 5 out of 134, TeliaSonera) to the overwhelming (85.7%, 12 out of 14, IKEA). (See Table 1 for a summary overview of the data.)

*The Environment as Economic Argument*

About two thirds of the press releases in our corpus include key environmental terms in their text, but do *not* make environmental and social performance or impact their main focus of attention. In 72 documents (28.3% of the total), the main newsworthy content is an issue of primarily *economic* significance, such as the acquisition of another organisation, the opening of new facilities or success in tendering a major project. Another 15.2% concerns *technical developments* in products, production processes or

infrastructure, including the launch of products with improved performance, upgrades to manufacturing plants and other facilities or the implementation of new technical processes. In 12.9% of the documents, the news value concerns changes in the *organizational governance* structure, such as the appointment of new Board members or the signature of a partnership agreement. A further 11.7% focus on *certification* or *awards*, like a third-party endorsement of the organisation's environmental and social credentials, such as its inclusion in a non-financial index, the certification of products or processes or awards granted to its performance and initiatives.

These cases represent texts in which environmentally oriented language (“green”, “eco-”, etc.) is present, but still only peripheral to the main newsworthy topic of interest. A clear indication of this marginal status is that environmental topics are frequently mentioned only once in the body text without being developed in subsequent paragraphs. 77.8% of the texts in the corpus show only one isolated mention of environmentally oriented terms. In many of these cases, especially when the focus of the press release is on technical or economic aspects, the exact nature and extent of the environmental impact of the news is left unspecified:

[U]nder Herr Dahlvigs ledarskap har IKEA placerat hållbarhet i hjärtat av sin produktutveckling och leveransstrategi. (IKEA 2009-4-21)

*Under Mr Dahlvig's leadership, IKEA has placed sustainable development at the heart of its strategy for product development and logistics.*

Skanskas ambition under byggtiden är att arbeta utifrån konceptet Grön arbetsplats där belysning, uppvärmning och annan energiförbrukning anpassas för att vara så låg som möjligt.. (Skanska 2009-6-16)

*Skanska aims to handle this project as a Green Construction Workplace, in which lighting, heating and other energy-consuming activities are reduced to a minimum.*

While the eco-friendliness of products, processes and companies is ostensibly touted in these texts, in the broader context it takes a back seat to economic aspects. Mentions of environmental topics in these press releases routinely subordinate their ecological dimensions to economic ones (Rice *et al.* 2012:140). It is hardly coincidental that the most frequently mentioned improvements in products and processes concerns energy efficiency, which has a clear financial incentive independent of its environmental aspects:

Med M4BP är ABB snabba med att erbjuda marknaden en motorserie som uppfyller de kommande kraven i Ekodesigndirektivet. Detta ger användarna möjlighet att redan nu agera miljömedvetet och samtidigt minska sina driftskostnader väsentligt. (ABB 2009-4-21)

*With the release of the M4BP motor line, ABB has met the requirements of Ecodesign Directives before they come into force. We are giving our customers the opportunity to be environmentally conscious right now, while at the same time substantially reducing their costs.*

Typical discussions of technical improvements highlight their potential for increasing productivity, without at any point mentioning the limits to productivity growth imposed by finite resources, or giving any indication of the expected environmental outcome.

Sometimes this neglect borders on the disingenuous, as when claims centre on the positive environmental effects of engineering improvements to oil refineries:

När våra kunder inom petrokemisektorn expanderar sin verksamhet för att möta den starka efterfrågan kan vi hjälpa dem att uppnå dessa mål samtidigt som vi ökar deras produktivitet och energieffektivitet. (ABB 2008-7-9)

*We can help our customers in the petrochemical sector [Petrobras] expand their operations to meet strong demand, while at the same time improving their productivity and energy efficiency.*

Nevertheless, even if environmental claims are conceptually peripheral to these texts, they seem to perform a strategic role within them. Environmentally oriented language is not evenly distributed across the text, but is substantially more frequent in specific functional slots. In titles, lead paragraphs, and especially quotes, terms relating to energy (e.g., *energieffektivitet* ‘energy efficiency’), climate (e.g., *klimatarbetet* ‘initiatives against climate change’) or environmental qualities more broadly (e.g., *förnyelsebar* ‘renewable’ or *ren* ‘pure, clean, non-polluted’) are up to 33 times more frequent than would be expected on the basis of their frequency in the overall text ( $G^2=15.820$ , 1 df,  $p<0.0001$ ).

These segments are precisely the textual environments that are most likely to be conserved if the press release is picked up as news. Jacobs (1999a) has shown that verbatim quotes, along with other more indirect forms of discourse representation, are effective in mitigating journalists’ and audiences’ negative perceptions of PR texts. By ‘fronting’ at least part of the message through a third party, organisations can make press releases sound more lively (the so-called dramatic function) and more neutral (the so-called distancing function); both aspects increase the likelihood of journalists’ incorporating them in their own version. This is, of course, independent of whether the quote is an accurate representation of a third party’s words. In some cases, the same pseudo-quote is repeated by the corporation, changing only the customer’s name in several different documents:

Vi erbjuder Oncor en miljöförbättrande och robust FACTS-lösning med kort leveranstid. (ABB 2009-4-9)

*We offer Oncor an environment-friendly and robust Flexible AC Transmission System, with a short delivery time.*

The other segment of the texts in which an above-average concentration of environmental terms can be observed are the boilerplate self-descriptions that typically foot these documents. Such footers conspicuously flaunt the organisation’s green credentials without regard for the press release’s main topic, and in unequivocally promotional language:

Stora Enso är ett världsledande företag inom hållbar skogsindustri. Vi erbjuder våra kunder lösningar som är baserade på förnybara råmaterial. Våra produkter är ett klimatvänligt alternativ till många icke-förnybara material och de lämnar ett mindre kolavtryck. Stora Enso ingår i Global 100-listan över världens mest hållbara företag. Stora Enso är även inkluderat i Dow Jones Sustainability Index, FTSE4Good Index och Climate Disclosure Leadership Index. (Stora Enso 2009-5-6)

*Stora Enso is a global leader in forest industry sustainability. We offer our customers solutions based on renewable raw materials. Our products provide a*



*climate-friendly alternative to many non-renewable materials, and have a smaller carbon footprint. Stora Enso is one of The Global 100 list of the world's most sustainable companies, and is also included in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, the FTSE4Good Index and the Climate Disclosure Leadership Index.*

### *Communicating about Communication*

Approximately one-third of the press releases (34.4%) focus primarily on social and environmental issues. These range from awards granted by the company to scientists, engineers and students working on technical solutions to environmental problems, to exhibits and conferences devoted to the promotion of environmentally-sustainable behaviours, to direct material and financial support for educational and health campaigns. Among these, only three texts (1.2% of the total) discuss programmes directly aimed at improving environmental conditions and mitigating impacts, and articulate their news value around this improvement. The small size of the sample makes any generalisation unreliable, but it seems noteworthy that the two programmes discussed (the Swedish National Initiative for Green Corridors joined by Volvo, and the Minimum Emissions Region programme in which ABB participates) are sponsored and coordinated by the public sector, and offer considerable economic and institutional incentives to participating companies.

Volvokoncernen inleder ett samarbete inom regeringens logistikforum och med myndigheterna för att förverkliga EU-kommissionens idé om miljöanpassade godstransporter i "Gröna korridorer". Målet är att minska påverkan på miljön och samtidigt öka effektiviteten och säkerheten på vägarna genom särskilt anpassade transportsträckor för tung trafik. (Volvo 2008-12-8)

*The Volvo Group has launched a joint project with the government's Logistics Forum and other agencies to implement the EU Commission's vision for "Green Corridors" of environmentally sound transportation. Our goal is to reduce impacts on the environment, while at the same time improve road efficiency and safety, through the construction of dedicated routes for heavy traffic.*

A further 12 press releases (4.7% of the total) announce awards given by the company to campaigns, innovations or discoveries with social and environmental impacts. Most of these come from two contributors. Volvo confers every year the *Miljöpris* 'Environment Prize' for basic research on environmental and sustainability studies, as well as the *Teknikpris* 'Technical Prize' for technological developments, including environmental mitigation, directly related to the company's business. The *Energispridarpris* 'Energy Spreader Prize' conferred by Vattenfall, on the other hand, focuses on community and social initiatives.

Volvos miljöpris –The Volvo Environment Prize– delas i år ut för 19:e gången och har under åren fått status som ett av världens mest prestigefyllda miljöpris. (Volvo 2008-11-3)

*This is the 19th edition of the Volvo Environment Prize, which has become over time one of the world's most prestigious environmental awards.*

Vattenfalls Energispridarpris delas ut till en person eller verksamhet som gör viktiga insatser för barn och ungdomar. (Vattenfall 2009-3-9)

*Vattenfall awards the Energy Spreader Prize to people and institutions who make significant contributions to the welfare of children and youth.*

A total of 15 texts (5.9% of the total) report directly on events and programmes with a social focus. Again, two contributors – IKEA and AstraZeneca – dominate the sample. The initiatives they present are primarily cases of cause-related marketing (transactional programs in which part of the profits from sales are given to charities, in exchange for the reputational benefit of associating with the cause), or philanthropic initiatives that contribute to social goals on a discretionary basis, rather than as an integrated element of the company's core business and mission. As a norm, such initiatives do not directly "improve the social and environmental impacts of a company's business activities" (Jenkins 2005:525).

IKEAs mjukdjurskampanj ger möjligheter för våra kunder och medarbetare att bli engagerade i arbetet för barns rättigheter i jultider. Vi hoppas sälja mer än 5 miljoner mjukdjur och tio kronor är tillräckligt för att köpa skolböcker och pennor till fem barn. (IKEA 2008-10-30)

*IKEA's plush toy campaign gives our customers and employees an opportunity to help children's rights this Christmas. We hope to sell more than 5 million plush dolls, and ten Swedish crowns are enough to buy schoolbooks and pens for five children.*

By far the largest group in this category is composed of texts that do announce or promote the provision of socially- or environmentally-oriented *information*, but without discussing the corporation's socially- or environmentally-oriented *action*. A total of 49 texts (19.1% of the total) fall into this category, representing outputs from 13 of the 15 companies in the sample (the remaining two contributed only 1 and 3 press releases to the corpus, respectively). The informational initiatives announced are of uneven scope, and a majority concern events and materials that are not intended for public consumption, such as the publication of non-financial reports (16 texts, 6.3% of the total), the scheduling of press conferences or the organisation of informative workshops for key, high-powered stakeholders such as government regulators (7 texts, 2.7%). In the corpus, 11 texts (4.3%) announce events that are open to the general public, such as exhibitions on company facilities, to awareness campaigns centred on helping users measure, understand and reduce their environmental footprint.

ABB deltog, som ett av flera svenska företag, i högtidliga sammanhang när Svensk-amerikanska handelskammaren höll miljöseminariet Green Summit i New York. (ABB 2008-9-30)

*ABB was one of the Swedish companies formally invited to the environmental Green Summit organised by the Swedish-American Chamber of Commerce in New York.*

Stora värmeljusjakten är tävlingen som ger Sveriges lärare och elever i klass 1–3 chansen att på ett kul sätt lära mer om återvinning och hur man kan spara energi. (IKEA 2008-9-2)

*The Great Tealight Chase is a competition designed to give schoolchildren aged 7–9 and their teachers a fun-filled opportunity to learn about recycling and how to save energy.*

Corporate communication initiatives of this sort that “reach out” and involve public participation can be of importance. The difficulties in fostering public engagement with environmental issues and in facilitating the behavioural changes that they require, at both the individual and social levels, can often be traced to deficiencies in the communication strategies used to articulate them in the public sphere (Ungar 1992: 484-485). Nevertheless, they do not give any direct indication of the sponsoring company’s environmental impact. The reputational benefit the company may confer is therefore independent of whether its environmental performance has actually improved. The high frequency of such topics – which give the companies the opportunity to *talk* about sustainability and rhetorically lead the way towards environmental solutions, without actually having to alter its business practices – lends weight to the argument of Milne et al. (2009: 1237) that “the ability of businesses to ‘do’ sustainability” occurs mainly “through the symbolism of reporting”. If the business case for sustainable development argues that competitive advantage can be gained by making customers aware of the company’s social and environmental responsibility, this scenario represents the case where communication about the good cause has become detached from the responsibility itself.

A minority of cases in the whole corpus provide supporting data to the claims made by the company, e.g., about ‘greening’ their business activities, whether quantitative (23.0 %) or qualitative (12.0%). The quantifiable evidence can in turn be grouped into three key topics: renewable energy production, reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and energy savings obtained by the company or their business partners. All these actions relate to the problem of climate change, and can be understood as corporations responses to widespread societal concerns about the implications of global warming. These stood high upon both the political, media and public agenda a short time before this study, and certainly before the spread of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008.

## Discussion

This overview of the common topics and tactics used in the environmentally themed press releases of large Swedish corporations shows that corporate voices make substantial use of environmental and ecological arguments in their strategic communication with journalists and newsrooms. One in five press releases includes such a reference, regularly intertwined with presentations of economical news about a company and its business activities. This “green” profile of Swedish businesses harmonizes with the otherwise widespread (self-)understanding of the nation as environmentally-friendly and an ecologic role model for others to follow (Egan Sjölander, Wolanik-Boström and Ögren 2010).

No tension at all between environmental and economical concerns is suggested in the corpus. Instead, these corporations present a “win-win” situation, and assume that improvements to environmental performance are in principle profitable as well. Such an ‘ecological modernization’ perspective – viewing economical development and environmental protection as susceptible of positive synergies (Hajer 1995) – is by no means exclusive to the Swedish business world. On the contrary, together with sustainable development, these viewpoints have underpinned environmental policy-making in most industrialized societies around the world for more than two decades (Berger, *et al.* 2001).

Still, the complete absence of tension between environmental and economical aspects in the studied corpus is somewhat surprising, partly because this relation, and the dominance of the latter, is elsewhere understood as a key conflict, not to say the main problem that needs to be resolved before a more sustainable future can be envisioned (Lélé 1991; Berger, *et al.* 2001). The constant demand for economic growth in societies, even if at the expense of natural resources and so on, is by many seen as the primary root to several of the environmental problems that we face today. Climate change and the intense use of fossil fuels that it implies is a clear and urgent example.

The common emphasis on the “green” angle in this corporate PR is *not* – contrary to what one could expect given the crucial role that business and industry actors in general, and the studied corporations in particular, play in the environmental context – backed up by any substantial information about its specificity or content. During the period of a year with an average of 3-4 press releases issued every day, less than a handful of the studied texts deal explicitly with the environmental impact of the business at stake. That corporations choose not to communicate more about these aspects can easily be interpreted as the result of strategic decision-making in order to secure profit. We claim that these findings feed democratic concerns, not only regarding politicians’ and journalists’ possibilities, but above all, the general public’s limited abilities to keep well informed about business activities and their environmental impact on the commons.

In terms of resources the public depend the most on other more powerful groups in society (Hansen 2011). As Lehtimäki *et al.* (2011: 433) point out when studying how corporate responsibility is articulated in press releases to respond to controversies, sometimes these means of communication are in fact the only way to disclose essential information about, as well as for, a company. This is one crucial reason for why it matters what these texts communicate.

That the corpus contains few examples of corporations addressing their specific environmental impact does not mean that environmental and social issues are marginal topics. A third of the studied press releases has a CSR-related theme as its main angle. Announcement and promotion of different sorts of information, e.g. publications of CSR or financial reports, meetings and prominent visits to the company and talks or conferences, is in turn the most frequent subject within this category. This communication about communication detached from the specific environmental actions performed by corporations has similar features to the corporate discourse on sustainable development that Milne *et al.* (2009) describe as “words, not actions”. Our results could also be interpreted as part of the problematic scenario that Morsing (2003) pictures where CSR work end up being run by PR professionals and corporate spin doctors and very loosely attached to social responsibility itself. Here the reason for the “good cause” is lost while the communication about it dominates corporate attention.

One could argue though that corporations inform, as well as communicate, with stakeholders, citizens or the public included, in a lot of varied ways apart from press releases and that they make use of other suitable forms of communication for this extended dialogue. However, the corpus studied here reveals few initiatives of such “out-reach” corporative work intended for the general public. We can conclude that there is no dialogic turn in sight, at least in the Swedish context (Philips 2011). In other words, communication activities intended to increase transparency and broaden public participation and knowledge making, as in this case regarding corporations environmental

impact etcetera, are largely missing. Despite the opportunities for dialogue generated by the digital revolution, corporate environmental communication over the new media still follows traditional models. Press releases continue to be a vital part of corporations' strategic communication (Hansen 2010: 62-69).

Of course there are limits to what one could expect to be communicated and covered in this particular genre of text tailored to suit the practices of journalists and newsrooms. To start with, the press release needs to have a clear angle or "hook" in order to be viewed as newsworthy (Jacobs 1999a; 1999b). The expected length of the text also put clear constraints to what is possible to cover. Furthermore, as multiple studies repeatedly shown, regardless of these features, the environmental beat struggle to get on the news agenda and this is due to the often abstract and complex nature of environmental issues (Hansen 2010).

The frequent use of environmental rhetoric and the preponderance of communication about communication that we have identified corroborate earlier studies of strategic corporate communication. Fredriksson's (2008) analysis of Swedish corporations annual and sustainability reports, for example, also shows that marketplace considerations, related to principles of business and economy, are the main theme in the rhetoric of responsibility that they employ. He further concludes that the information corporations provide is generally self-referential and lacks substantive content, which in turn supports the idea of corporations using rhetoric to disguise the need for substantial changes in their practice. The dominance of market issues and corporate economical interests has also been pointed out in Lehtimäki's *et al.*'s (2011) review of press releases issued by a Finnish multinational company operating abroad.

Further research should investigate the actual media exposure gained by these press releases. An analysis of news media content during the same period could reveal to what extent corporations' efforts to shape media discourse have been successful, and to what extent they can contribute to their goal of influencing policy and enhancing their reputation. A key question in this regard is how business and industry subsidies to the news-making process compare to those of other relevant sources. It also seems important to identify what features and parts of the press releases are taken up and re-used in the newsroom. Such analytical work would be an answer to Hansen's (2011: 20) appeal for more studies on communicative power and its unequal distribution in environmental communication since, as we also argue, it "significantly affects the ability to participate in and influence the nature of public 'mediated' communication about the environment". The on-going greening of corporate PR without addressing issues of environmental impact severely limits the public understanding of business activities and their impact on the environmental commons.

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