

« Sustainability » as Shield or Standard: Corporate Environmental Rhetoric in Action

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Sustainability is a contested term. This paper investigates the corporate rhetoric concerning the concept. How do corporations talk about sustainability, what are the rationales given for engaging in sustainable practices, and what might be the consequences of this rhetoric? Previous studies have concluded that corporations portray sustainability as a journey and have shown how some corporations call themselves sustainable since they are striving towards sustainability. Critics, however, argue that the focus must be on the end state of sustainability and calls for exposing this type of rhetoric as greenwash. The main argument is that there is a gap between what the corporations are saying and their environmental practices. Corporations are accused of applying strategic definitions of sustainability to further their own interest, while little change is taking place concerning their environmental practice. Yet other commentators alert us to the performative function of rhetoric and argue that corporations must be given leeway to talk the walk. Changes in organizational practices can be slow, but talking about sustainability may be a first step in the right direction. These points are juxtaposed and discussed with the help of an analysis of corporate rhetoric in non-financial reports from Fortune Global 500 companies. The most striking finding is that so many of the corporations opt to treat sustainability as given and unproblematic instead of addressing the fundamental problems of today's practice or the dilemmas of the concept.