



Website stories in times of distress

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Abstract

Highlighting the uniqueness of websites as a specific form of interactive and visual communication tool, we explore how corporate websites aid storytelling in times of distress. Using the corporate website of BP as our empirical context, we analyze the visual story that unfolded before and after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster through a visual semiotic method, and argue that the changes in the story potentially mitigated the impact of the environmental catastrophe after the spill. We propose that our website analysis of a case of serious corporate misdoing, where a company's stated and actual environmental practices were in dissonance, provides an insight to the construction of the 'liquid organization,' as well as to what Bauman calls 'liquid power' or 'the art of escape from all forms of social responsibility.' As such, we believe that mobilizing website study in management practice and education can provide a better understanding of 'corporate hypocrisy' in a liquid, modern world, as well as enable stakeholders' responsibility and power to hold organizations accountable for their misdoings.

Keywords

Case study, critical management education, narrative, natural environment, social media, storytelling

Corporate websites are surprisingly under-explored in organization studies. Despite the 'visual turn' noted by organizational researchers and the importance of websites as a powerful visual form of communication, website analysis remains largely in the domain of media studies and marketing (Bell et al., 2014). Yet, at a time when 'the visual enters into almost every aspect of organizational strategy, operations and communication' (Bell et al., 2014: 1), the insights a website provides about a company must be brought to the research forefront. In addition, if websites are 'another text to be read, giving clues about the cultures that produce it' (Warren, 2005: 861), then becoming proficient in reading such 'texts' is important for both management scholars and practitioners facing increasing instances of 'corporate hypocrisy' (Wagner et al., 2009).

Many companies have been accused of irresponsible behavior in the last few years. Just recently, Volkswagen was accused of 'systematic fraud' when it was revealed that several of its diesel-powered

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cars employed software that deceitfully showed lower emissions (*The Economist*, 26 September 2015), while ExxonMobil was being investigated for possible ‘climate change lies’ (Gillis and Krauss, 2015). An even more pronounced example of corporate hypocrisy is the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster involving BP (Muralidharan et al., 2011). In all these and many other cases, firms not only act contrary to their stated standards of responsibility but also seek to mitigate the impact of inconsistency through various communication strategies (Wagner et al., 2009). In these attempts, website utilization is a powerful tool.

In this study, we ask, how does a corporate website, as an interactive visual communication tool, aid storytelling in light of an inconsistency between stated and actual corporate environmental practices? And, how does this story potentially enhance and legitimize corporate power? There are several reasons why website study should feature in our research agenda on management learning. First, websites serve as corporate ‘storytellers’ as they transmit both high-level management messages and the corporate identity to outsiders (Coupland and Brown, 2004). Second, websites differ from other forms of corporate communication since the website user is dynamically involved in the ‘telling’ of the corporate story through his or her navigation act; as such, the user is less a recipient and more a co-constructor of this story. Third, websites, as the most ‘fluid’ of all organizational constructs, may be the most appropriate means through which to study the non-committal, shifting organization of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000).

To address the questions above and to highlight the importance of website analysis, we study the visual story that unfolded on the BP website before and after the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe. Specifically, we follow the website through an 8-year span and use a multi-methodological approach to analyze BP’s stated environmental commitments before the spill, as well as to document how the story changed after the spill to mitigate its environmental impacts. Placing our research within the broader discussion of storytelling in organizations, we discuss both the methodological challenges we faced and the structure we used to look at the website systematically. Our concluding discussion highlights the potential we see in mobilizing website study in management practice and education.

The storytelling organization in visual, liquid times

Previous research tells us that organizational stories are especially needed in times of crisis when individuals seek to ‘make the unexpected expectable, hence manageable’ (Robinson, 1981: 60). As Brown et al. (2008) write, when groups need to construct meaning from puzzling and troubling data, they engage in storytelling, seeking to find the ‘reasonable and memorable, (that) which embodies past experience and expectations’ (p. 1038). But not all stories are effective (Boje, 1994). Several features make a difference in why one story wins over competing stories, including the story’s dramatic quality, central characters, concrete language, imagery (Taylor et al., 2002), and power (Boje, 1995). Gabriel (1991) defines this power as the ability to rouse emotions, where stories represent ‘facts as experience’ rather than ‘facts as information.’ Taylor et al. (2002) also suggest that power has less to do with *who* is telling the story and more with the ‘artfulness’ or ‘aesthetic quality’ of the storytelling. To this effect, imagery—or more broadly the use of visuality—plays a central role, as it differentiates between a ‘good’ story (one with a ‘strong aesthetic experience’) and a ‘bad’ story (one with ‘no aesthetic experience’) (Taylor et al., 2002: 317).

Several researchers have called for a careful examination of the ‘hegemonic effects of the visual’ (Meyer et al., 2013: 515) in organizational practices, arguing that organizations are fully aware that visual and verbal forms of information are encoded and processed differently by audiences. In fact, they say, organizations often manipulate the visual to distract attention from reporting facts

(McKinstry, 1996), or even to recreate the past (Foster et al., 2011), thus transforming reality (Muller, 2008). Matilal and Höpfl (2009), for example, argued that the photographic image used in reports of Union Carbide's Bhopal disaster was an attempt 'to restore the body to the text,' so used purposefully as a rhetorical device (p. 953). The image 'is empathic, it draws the viewer into a different stance ... (it) has the power to move' (p. 954).

Here, we see corporate websites as telling a story, simultaneously a projection of the company's image (Coupland and Brown, 2004) and an image (a visual) itself. Since stories are fundamental to processes of individual and organizational sensemaking (Bruner, 1990), we find the study of website stories compelling for several reasons. First, as the most *visual* of all corporate communication tools (Muller, 2008), websites—with an obvious aesthetic dimension—provide a 'good,' 'artful' story. In cases of corporate hypocrisy, delving beneath the surface of an 'artful' construction is crucial as this relates directly to dissecting an inconsistency between what a company says and what it does. Second, examining how a website story *changes* in times of distress, or even under what conditions and by what processes it changes, provides an insight to how 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' organizational practices may be (Boje, 1991), and the extent to which corporate power is mobilized to hide certain information.

There are two additional unique reasons why analyzing website stories is important in studies of corporate hypocrisy: (1) users' active engagement in constructing and telling the corporate story and (2) the fluidity of website navigation, which inherently encompasses the possibility of telling several stories at the same time—or what Boje (1995) calls the 'plurivocality of discourse'—and which may ultimately enhance corporate unwillingness to commit to any one single story of responsibility (p. 1009). Unlike other forms of corporate storytelling, in websites, the company is not just telling a story and a user interpreting it; rather, the user co-produces meaning as he or she makes specific choices about where to 'click.' Thus, while the company is the one providing the 'raw material' for the story (the information displayed on the website), the way that this material is woven into a sensible story is up to the user, making him or her *actively* involved in its construction. We see this connection as similar to Gabriel's (2000) 'narrative contract,' a kind of 'deal' between storyteller and audience, whereby poetic license is granted in exchange for a narrative that 'makes sense.' In cases of corporate hypocrisy, this co-construction may be highly problematic if the user feels an affinity to or ownership of the story produced, as it may unwittingly help to justify corporate practices.

What's more, without devaluing the importance of the material *chosen* by the company for website use, it can be argued that there are potentially as many stories told via the website as the number of different journeys taken by those navigating it. This last observation reminds us of Boje's (1995) *Tamara* metaphor:¹ website users are like the audience in *Tamara*—'the story-teller and the story-listener are co-constructors of each story event as a multiplicity of stories get enacted' (Boje, 1995: 1000). Of course, like in *Tamara*, the characters, setting, timeframe, and main plot still form the main ingredients of the story as provided by the company. Below, we relate these ingredients to what we call the 'grammar' of the website.

Finally, websites provide unique insights to the organization of 'liquid modernity'—an era of constant change, where relationships, identities, and global economies are characterized by incessant mobility (Bauman, 2000). According to Bauman (2000), a *liquid* form of social life constructs personal and organizational identities that are continuously shifting, slippery, uncommitted. Websites, as a comparable fluid and continuously changing construct, mirror the shifting organizational identity and may be, therefore, the most appropriate means through which to study the fluid, non-committal organization. Simultaneously, the user navigating the website (who is co-telling the story) also shifts from one position/site to another in a liquid-like manner, acting more as a 'tourist' in search of multiple experiences (Bauman, 2000: 14). The user–website relationship echoes

Bauman's (2000) position that 'a durable, solid identity that coheres over time and space has become increasingly impossible' (p. 14), at an individual and organizational level alike.

Methods

To overcome the challenges of studying what could be seen as a 'moving target,' we employed various interpretive methods. One challenge was the limited research on website analysis in organization studies (exceptions include Coupland and Brown, 2004; Elliott and Robinson, 2011; Pablo and Hardy, 2009). Another was the unique website characteristics such as non-linearity and the fact that each visitor's navigation may be different (Elliott and Robinson, 2014: 275); so, we had to devise a systematic way of following the website despite its changing, fluid nature so that readers could trace our analytical steps. Using visual data was additionally challenging since we had to systematically choose the images to analyze and then accurately describe *what we saw, how we saw it, and why we saw it that way*. This process required a great degree of reflexivity.

To deal with these challenges, we used a multi-methodological analytical approach, drawing on work in visuality and narrative studies. First, to *look* at the BP website systematically, we relied on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual semiotic method which 'concentrates on the 'grammar' (of visual design) ... the way in which (various visual) elements (such as symbols, colors, and photographs) are combined into meaningful wholes' (p. 1). Similar to the way in which grammars of language describe how words combine in sentences, visual grammar describes how depicted elements—people, places, and things—combine in visual 'statements.' We consider this 'grammar' as the fundamental building block of the corporate story—these are the 'raw ingredients' provided by the company through which users *co-construct* a story. Second, we drew on Elliott and Robinson's (2011, 2014) works on the construction of corporate websites, with a more direct focus on the *images*—the visual representations—used. Third, like other visuality researchers (e.g. Bell et al., 2014), we treated BP's website as a form of visual narrative—'narrative' in the sense of an interpretive system that helps organize experience (Bruner, 1990). Finally, we relied on Jewitt and Oyama's (2001) social semiotic approach to 'interrogate' this narrative and to 'bring out hidden meanings.' Throughout our study, we were motivated by the need to understand how websites act as organizational 'storytellers' and what they may tell us about the use or abuse of corporate power in times of distress.

Data collection

We started by tracking BP's homepage (www.bp.com) since we considered this the 'beginning' of the BP story and the common entry point of all viewers in making meaning of its actions. As Pablo and Hardy (2009) note, the homepage functions 'like a magazine's front page, it acts as an advertisement for the portal's contents and establishes the genre of the portal ... (offering) a strong, though not compulsory, interpretive frame for what is to follow' (p. 826). We began tracking BP's website in March 2006 and zoomed in on any changes made to the page on a *bi-weekly* basis, cataloguing such changes. Then, since we were interested in its environmental commitment and record, we zoomed in on BP's 'Environment' page (a subordinate page), one level deeper than the homepage. In 2009 and 2010, this page was renamed 'Environment and Society' and 'Sustainability,' respectively. These pages constituted our main database for comparative analysis. Naturally, there were time periods when we observed no notable changes. In the weeks after Deepwater Horizon (April–October 2010), a research assistant helped us track website changes daily. For consistency and data manageability, such changes focused, again, on the homepage and the Environment/

Sustainability section. Where necessary, we noted (but did not analyze) other links associated with these pages as background information.

Data analysis

For our analysis, we traced changes on three socio-semiotic dimensions, which we considered as the ‘grammar’ of visual design: structure of the website, colors and symbols used, and photographs (Elliott and Robinson, 2011, 2014; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). We categorized photographs into three themes (deduced from tracking the website in the 8-year period): showing people, nature, and technology/science. We did not analyze each picture individually but the category in which it belonged as a whole, using representative examples; that is, we inferred meaning from pictures of nature by looking at key examples, such as a picture of a daisy or a green field. To analyze these shots, we relied on the method of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and Elliott and Robinson (2011), which treats semiotic resources as both cultural and cognitive and utilizes four semiotic systems: representational meaning, modality, composition, and interactive meaning (explained below).

Then, to understand the resulting narrative, we synthesized the interpretations from the previous step to (1) see whether we could discern an overall pattern across different features associated with website changes over time and (2) see whether a dominant ‘plot’ emerged before and after the disaster. Such an interpretation obviously entails our view as researchers-users (Czarniawska, 1997).

Our role as researchers

Our study actually has its own story. We began this study in early 2005 as part of a larger project on the use of green imagery by oil companies. A few weeks before the Deepwater Horizon disaster, we were ready to submit a paper about BP’s website arguing, in fact, that BP’s commitments offered a novel way through which oil exploration and environmental responsibility could co-exist. We even classified various problems that could have ‘warned’ us about BP’s practices as ‘accidents.’ When Deepwater Horizon happened, our ready-to-be-submitted draft became irrelevant. As researchers, we had to recover from the shock that anyone would suffer after years of hard work. As devoted environmentalists, we also had to grapple with misreading the greenwashing signs, drawn into a discourse to which we were ideologically opposed. After the disaster, we diligently followed the coverage of the event on the BP website and in social and traditional media with the help of a research assistant and by October 2010, we reframed our research question vis-a-vis the disaster.

Our own ‘story’ shows that the *interpretation* of a website is both contextual and reflexive and that the interpretations can be as numerous as the stories told through the website. Our ‘failure’ prompted us to further ‘immerse (ourselves) in the stream of organizational events in an inductive attempt to formulate ‘thick description’” (Brown et al., 2008: 1041). With our research assistant, we were able to compare interpretations and double-check our notes. Of course, our goal was not to ‘find’ the meaning of ‘a’ story but rather to understand the *process* of organizational storytelling in times of distress—in our case, when stated and actual environmental practices are revealed to be contradictory.

Furthermore, our realization that *even we* could be ‘hijacked’ by the corporate story—the corporate agenda had clearly overflowed into our own act of research—forced us to refocus our assumptions and questions. It is in this context that corporate power, enabled through website use, became critical to our investigation as our experience highlighted the potential of becoming ‘accomplices’ to this power.

The case

'The British Petroleum Company' became 'BP' in 1998 when its then-CEO, Lord Browne, launched the 'Beyond Petroleum' campaign (Cherry and Sneirson, 2011). The 'Beyond Petroleum' tagline deliberately played on the BP acronym and came alongside a new logo, a yellow and green sunflower symbol representing the Greek sun-god Helios, to reflect the company's dedication to environmental stewardship (Barrage et al., 2014). Browne, one of the first oil executives to acknowledge the existence of climate change, strategically rebranded BP as 'green' and pushed to distance it from its 'tarnished image' (Schwartz, 2004). The campaign which ran from 2000 to 2008 focused on 'reputation,' 'dialogue,' and 'awakening of a force for good' (Rogan et al., 2004: 434–436), while the company began marketing itself as an energy company interested in renewables (Cherry and Sneirson, 2011). Many believed that the 200 million dollars pumped into the campaign was money well spent as it seemed to cushion the impact of several disasters, including the 2005 Texas City refinery explosion, the 2006 leak of BP's Alaskan pipeline, and the 2008 rupture of the Atlantis Oil Platform in the Gulf of Mexico. It is noteworthy that in 2008, BP was listed on *Fortune's* '10 Most Accountable Big Companies' list (*CNNMoney*, 14 November 2008), a complete reversal from its previous 'laggard' classification (Rice, 1993). Yet, in April 2010, a blast on Transocean's offshore oil-rig 'Deepwater Horizon,' a platform licensed to BP, killed 11 workers and, with its sinking, led to the release of at least 200 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. This is the world's largest ever accidental release of oil into marine waters (National Commission, 2011).

Deepwater Horizon destroyed BP's public image. For 87 days, the world anxiously watched the efforts to stop the gushing of oil into the Gulf. Even though the well was declared sealed on 19 September 2010, scientists are still recording the spill's catastrophic effects years later. Numerous investigations consistently blame BP and its partners, Transocean and Halliburton (the rig operator and contractor), for a series of cost-cutting decisions and insufficient safety systems (National Commission, 2011).

Although previous research examined different aspects of the disaster, including the role of green advertising (Barrage et al., 2014) and the role of social media in BP's image restoration (Muralidharan et al., 2011), the use of its website in its recovery efforts has been neglected. It is to this analysis that we now turn.

The 'Grammar' of the BP website

We treat BP's webpage as an *image* itself in the way it is structured and presented and zoom in on the *images*—photographs, colors, and symbols—featured on this page. When combined, these form a 'representation' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006), which can be interpreted as a form of 'grammar.' As discussed, images also follow rules of perceptual grammar, much like words woven together in a text, to form a visual narrative (Gabriel, 2000). Below, we discuss changes on the website in structure, photographs, colors, and symbols between 2006 and 2014 and then analyze the narrative constructed.

Structure

Consistent with broader changes in website design in the 8-year span of the study, BP's website was enriched with animations, webcasts, and links to social media tools. For this study, however, we focus specifically on changes in webpage structure, since the way information is presented is reflective of what a company values most, according to Elliott and Robinson (2011).

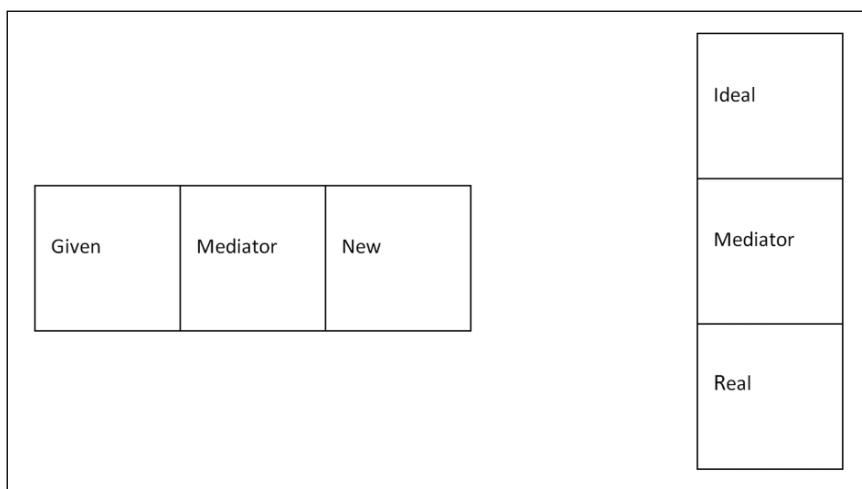


Figure 1. Vertical and horizontal triptych structures.

Source: Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 201).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) note that a ‘triptych’ is common in websites as this tends to be the most helpful structure in comprehending and retaining information (p. 199). ‘Vertical triptychs’ feature the ‘given’ information on the far left, a ‘new’ on the right, and a center which bridges the two, acting as ‘mediator.’ ‘Horizontal triptychs’ feature the ‘ideal’ on the top part, a ‘real’ on the bottom, and a connecting ‘mediator’ in the center, often used to overcome any ‘contradictions’ between ideal and real (Figure 1). Based on the idea that these representations reflect ‘specific, oftentimes political, decisions of the interlocutor’ and a ‘specific picture of reality’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 1), we see how changing the placement of a text or photograph helps to construe something as ‘given’ or ‘new.’ Similarly, it is important to understand what is presented as ‘real’ or ‘ideal,’ as well as what ‘mediates’ between the two.

From 2005 to 2009, the Environment webpage followed a simple vertical triptych structure, then changed into a horizontal structure after approximately a year of transition in a mixed form (October 2009–November 2010). Figure 2 shows a representative example of the initial triptych. Here, we see an abundance of text in the left and right columns unite the connecting middle features a Nature close-up (in this example, a flower; in others, a clear sky, dandelions or bright clouds) and an accompanying slogan of environmental commitment. The ‘given’ (left) section steadily featured two connecting tabs: climate change and conservation. *Climate change* specifically addressed ‘the actions (BP) take(s) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions’ and listed these in the connecting link. *Conservation* explained ‘why conservation and biodiversity matter to BP; how (BP) support(s) the global need for fresh water’ and featured connecting tabs such as ‘biodiversity,’ ‘working in sensitive areas,’ and ‘fresh water.’ While the connecting links changed in content or were embellished over the years (e.g. ‘investing in energy efficiency’ was added in April 2007 and ‘greenhouse gas audit’ in January 2008), the main sections of ‘climate change’ and ‘conservation’ remained on the left until the structure changed to a mixed triptych in 2009, when the webpage was also renamed from ‘Environment’ to ‘Environment and Society.’

In the initial structure, products and operations found on the right side manifest the ‘new’ (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 205). It is here that we see ‘cleaner energy products’ and tabs on ‘energy efficiency,’ ‘green office,’ ‘land restoration,’ and ‘decommissioning.’

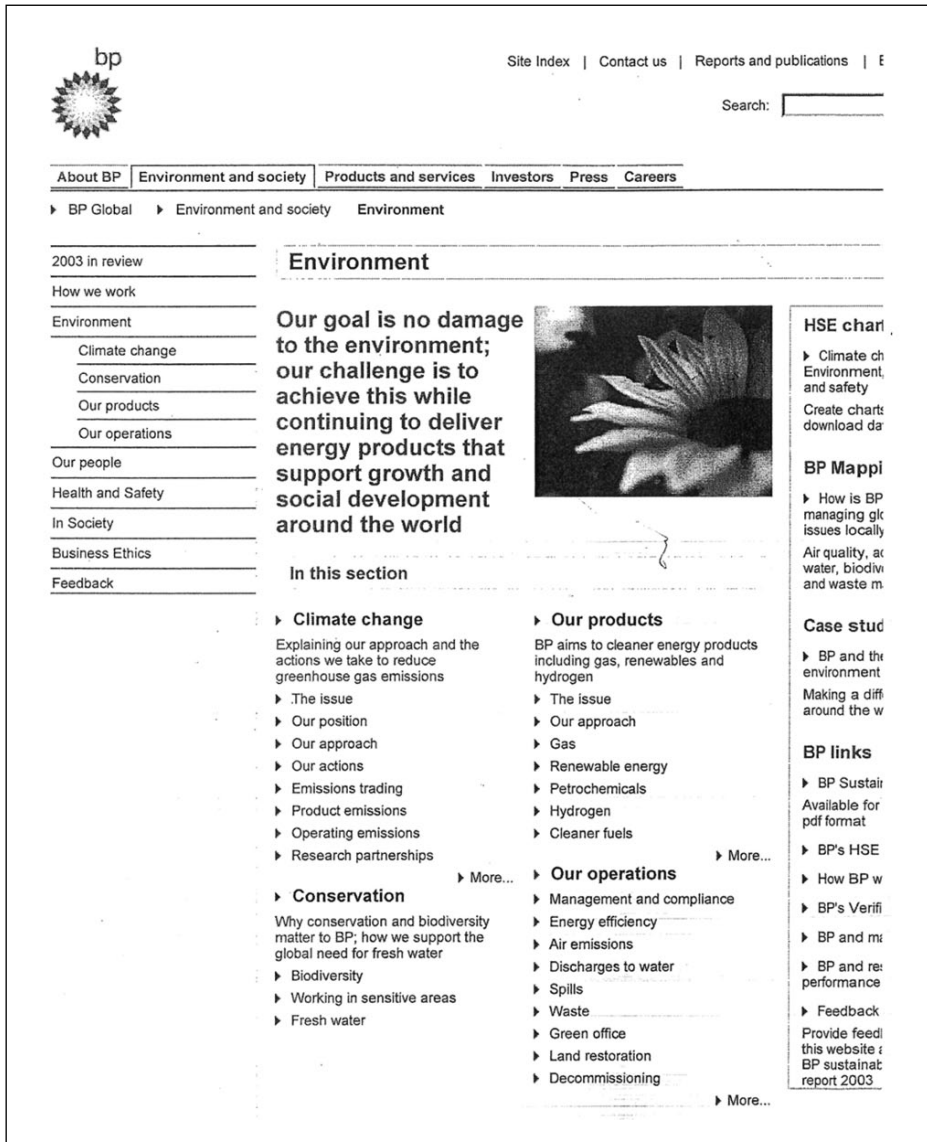


Figure 2. 'Environment' webpage, March 2006.

What is interesting in this setup is the rather unexpected positioning of what is 'given' and what is 'new': although one would expect company products and operations to feature on the left as 'given,' instead we see 'climate change' and 'conservation.' One interpretation is that positioning is used to signify BP's 'given' commitment to these issues, a setup consistent with BP's broader 'green' campaign.

The 2009–2010 structure is a 'transition' structure, not only because it was a mixed triptych but also because it coincided with the transitional period before and after the spill. It was characterized mostly by a turn toward more photos and brighter colors, discussed below, and a 'play' on the word 'energy' (see Figure 3).

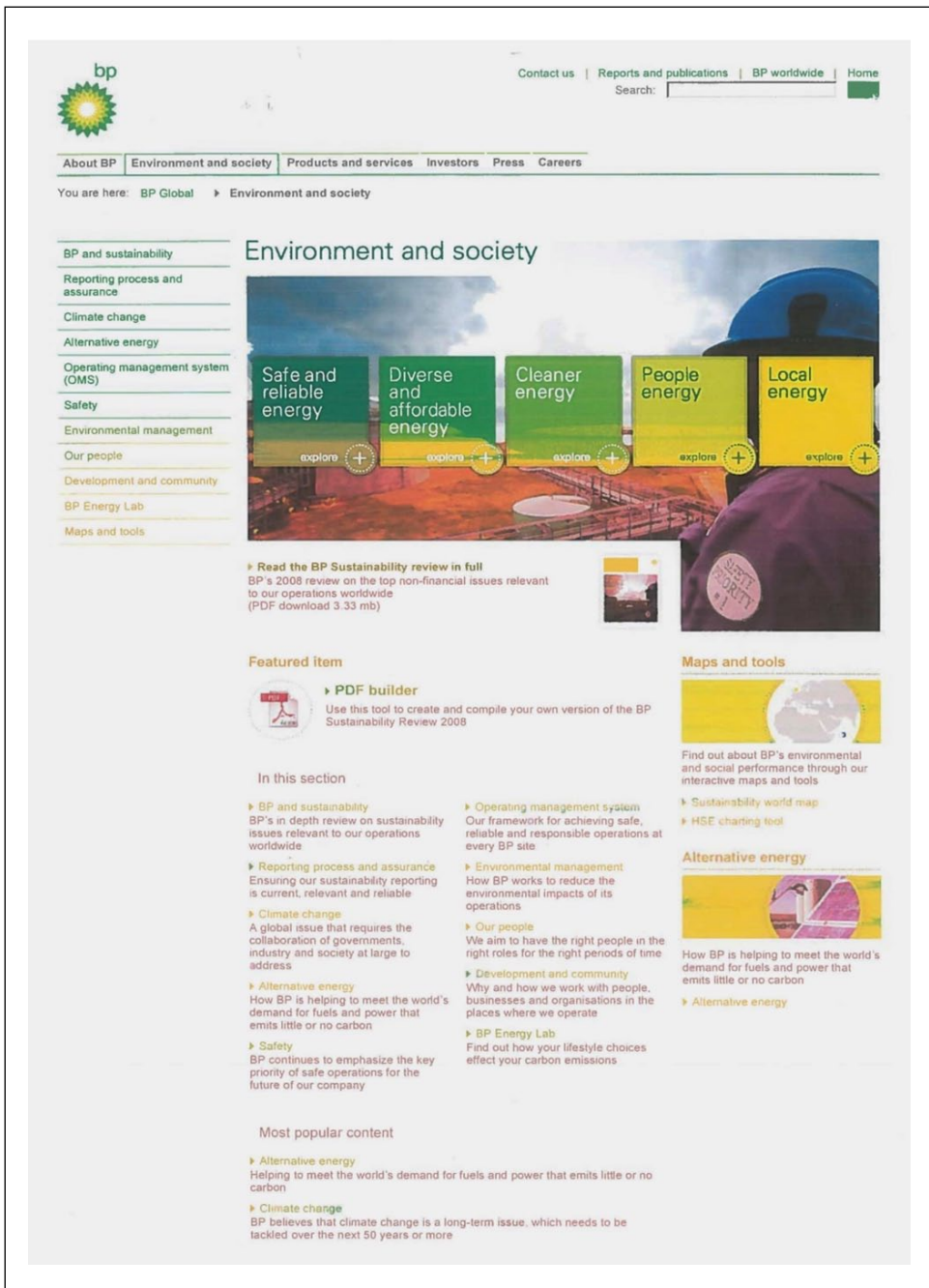


Figure 3. BP 'Environment and society' webpage, October 2009.

The subsequent horizontal triptych structure shows a clear turn toward vivid and poignant imagery and much less focus on text. The three parts of the webpage feature what is 'ideal' on the top, what is considered 'real' on the bottom, and a 'mediator' part connecting the two (Kress

and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 207). This structure remained unchanged from 2010 until the end of our data collection period, despite some changes in content. Interestingly, the 'ideal' part remained exactly the same in the 4-year span after Deepwater Horizon (with only minor changes in the text font) which read: 'We strive to be a world-class operator, a responsible corporate citizen and a good employer. We believe we have a positive role to play in meeting growing energy demands around the world.' This text was followed by a prominent close-up photograph of a uniformed engineer, either peering through a pipeline (as in the example of Figure 4), in a lab, or in the field. A caption with bright green text reading 'Our strategy and sustainability' also remained unchanged from 2010 to 2014, alongside the statement 'We believe that the best way for BP to achieve sustainable success as a company is to act in the long-term interests of our shareholders, our partners and society' in smaller font. Four rows of photographs were used as 'connectors.' These typically featured scientists and engineers hard at work, as in Figure 4, or a general science and technology theme. The 'real' section on the bottom of the page connects users to press releases and various downloads, such as BP's annual report and BP's sustainability review, as in the example. Remarkably, in one of the later website accounts of 2014, another part was added at the very bottom of the page titled 'Related content.' A link here took users to the 'Gulf of Mexico restoration,' while the caption under a serene photograph of a fishing boat in bright blue waters read 'BP is supporting economic and environmental restoration efforts in the Gulf Coast as part of our on-going commitment to the region following the Deepwater Horizon accident of 2010' (emphasis ours). The 'accident' reference was adopted around this time and used throughout the site.

Photographs

We treated the photographs that appear on the website as 'narrative accounts' (Ball and Smith, 1992: 67) which, along with colors and symbols, form both 'the manifest and the latent content of a narrative' (Ball and Smith, 1992: 26). According to Ball and Smith (1992: 16), photographs are believed to 'mirror reality' or to 'depict what is actual' so add to the believability of a message, even if their influence or interpretation is not conscious (Goldstein, 2007). Gabriel (2011) notes that in today's image-driven society, photographs possess considerable emotional and rhetorical power; images are 'instantaneous' and often make a story 'incontestable,' 'one that cannot be ignored.' The saying 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is true, not so much in the sense that a picture (or in this case photograph) replaces words but in that it evokes emotions that guide the interpretation of words in a specific way. In other words, photographs tell a 'tacit story' that strengthens the main plot line (Yanow, 1995: 412). We discuss this story in the subsequent section.

Our analysis of the photographs used shows an increasing reliance on the power of the image. While at the beginning of the study, the website featured one main photograph with a strong reliance on text, by the end of 2010, we see a change toward a multiplicity of images on the webpage (12–15) and brief accompanying captions. The change in themes is also evident: while pre-spill images on the Environment page featured close-ups of nature (daisies and other flowers, clear skies, bright clouds), post-spill the imagery changes drastically to a strong science/technology theme. In fact, in the post-disaster years, we did not see even one photograph with a nature theme. In Figure 4, for example, the images featured helmeted and uniformed men, either in the field or in the lab. They are serious, hard-working, and concentrating on the task at hand. Their body language (e.g. hand on chin) shows they are thinking, while the safety gear worn (helmets, ear muffs, goggles, masks) alongside the handling of ominous-looking equipment add to the impression that this is a demanding job.

Website Governance

BP

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Sustainability

Sustainability

We strive to be a world-class operator, a responsible corporate citizen and a good employer. We believe we have a positive role to play in meeting growing energy demand around the world

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We believe that the best way for BP to achieve sustainable success as a company is to act in the long-term interests of our shareholders, our partners and society

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[BP at a glance \(pdf, 435.9KB\)](#)

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<http://www.bp.com/global/corporate/sustainability.htm> Thu Sep 04 2014 12:43:45 GMT+0300 (TST) Desktop View

Figure 4. BP 'Sustainability' webpage, March 2014.

Using the four semiotic systems of Elliott and Robinson (2011), we propose that the single photo of the pre-disaster webpage (e.g. the close-up of the daisy in Figure 2) was meant to elicit warm and positive emotions, even though the *representational meaning* of the images—the meaning drawn by a viewer based on his or her previous experience—was ambiguous in regard to BP.

On the one hand, the images of nature may be used to substantiate the company's stated commitment about 'no damage to the environment;' yet no attempt was made to establish a direct relationship with the viewer in visual terms. There are no individuals in the photo, and the *modality* of the image seems compromised, that is, the image is de-contextualized as there are no clues as to where this photograph was taken, while its connection to the page or to BP is generic if not unsubstantiated. Thus, while the *composition* of the page highlights the image by placing it in the center and the framing of the shot (a solitary close-up) suggests that this image is important, the viewer is left to make a connection to the rest of the information on the page by himself or herself. In other words, the daisy in our example—which could be any daisy anywhere—may evoke positive feelings about the importance of the environment, but it is devoid of a connection with BP and its practices. Of course, as McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) argue, this openness and ambiguity is what drives visuals' persuasive appeal, while also making it difficult to hold the producers of images accountable for a conveyed message. In fact, they suggest that images are purposefully used to transport messages that cannot be verbalized—sometimes for legal reasons.

In the post-disaster years, we were struck by the prominence of the image, the abundance of vibrant colors, and especially the color green, and the devaluation of text. The photographs are intimate close-ups, conveying a feeling of 'being right there,' the viewer 'no longer detached or distant' but part of the company (Elliott and Robinson, 2011: 163). The central position of the photographs suggests that their *representational meaning* is significant to the overall visual narrative. In the photograph at the center top (the 'ideal'), we see a serious scientist/researcher/BP employee, while all the others feature mainly *male* scientists at work, as well. Although the gendered nature of these images can form the basis of another study, here, we note that using the masculine to invoke authority and increase legitimacy is a frequent social and organizational practice (Kostera, 2012). The close-up of these shots gives a sense of intimacy—the viewer being part of the workings of BP—adding to the credibility of the information conveyed. *Modality*, the degree to which a photograph appears real in a naturalistic sense, is very high since the viewer is afforded both a glimpse of the 'day to day workings' of BP and also the huge scientific effort that goes into sustainability. When shots do not show BP employees, they usually show a graph, a link to online reports, an oil platform, or hydraulic fracturing, as in the example of Figure 4. The *composition* of the page which is linear, potentially points to the linear story told through particular images which are meant to invoke the power of science as a way to gain legitimacy. Finally, in regard to the *interactive meaning*—the site's relationship with the viewer—the post-disaster site conveys not only a sense of intimacy with the company through the plethora of naturalistic photos, but with the use of people-centered shots it may be trying to send a message of 'we are people too' after the demonization of the company following the spill.

Colors and symbols

One of the first things we notice about the BP website, both pre- and post-spill, is the color green which seems deliberate and fundamental to the story told. Color is an essential feature of the seen world: 'Objects are classified, and described using their color as a significant identificatory principle' (Ball and Smith, 1992: 58). Sassoon (1990), for example, argues that all colors are ideological and that 'the more marked the tendency to a monochromatic option, the more apparent the

ideological adherence to the semantic fields evoked by colors' (p. 177). If this is the case, then BP wants to present itself as an ideologically 'green' company.

Upon entering the site, we see (and classify) this as a *green site*. The tabs, text, and main captions are in green, and after 2010, the whole bottom part featuring additional information is a block of vibrant green. The association of the color green with the natural environment has a long history (Sassoon, 1990: 176). An additional interpretation of the color green is 'naïve and raw' (Ball and Smith, 1992: 58). So, BP may want to be regarded as 'green' both in the environmental sense and in the sense of purity.

Another prominent, unchanging feature of the site is the sun or *helios*, BP's logo. The logo with the green-lettered 'bp' written on top of it are on the upper left side of the page, which according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) is significant for languages like English that read left to right. Placing something there is important and meaningful, much like the beginning of a sentence, and ensures that the viewer mentally classifies this information as 'the most salient element' of a composition and a 'given' (p. 204).

Symbols are 'signs which denote something greater than themselves ... meant to evoke emotion' (Jones, 1996: 2). *Helios* is a powerful organizational archetype, important in stories of cosmogony, and an indisputable force of life (Kostera, 2012). The solar deity is present in most recorded history, albeit in different forms. In Greek cosmogony, Helios, a Titan, is also referred to by Homer as 'all-seeing' (*panoptes*). Its symbolic meaning conveys that without it—without its *energy*—we human beings cannot survive. Without sun (without BP), we have darkness and all the things associated with it—the unknown, evil, death. In short, the sun is life.

The BP story

Even if language remains a dominant sign system of society, visuals 'materialize, organize, communicate, store and pass on knowledge' (Meyer et al., 2013: 493) in the form of a narrative. Using the 'visual grammar' from our first analytical step, we synthesized the story told by BP before and after Deepwater Horizon, seeking to understand how this grammar 'created, transformed, or stabilized particular 'versions' of reality' (Meyer et al., 2013: 511). To extract the story told, we focused on the dominant plot, the main protagonists and emotions elicited.

Concisely, our analysis shows that, first, the monochromatic emphasis of the site tells a story of 'greenness'—initially in the sense of an ideological commitment to the environment and later, when this was no longer believable, as an innocent, fresh company. Second, the most salient element on the site remains the archetypal sun symbol, *helios*. We read this symbol as indicating that, no matter what ensues, BP will always be a part of our lives as (its) energy is at the core of who we are. Third, based on the website structure, we see that before the disaster, the company stated its 'given' commitment to work proactively for conservation and climate change with its 'new' and innovative products and operations; after the disaster, the structure changed to reflect how science and technology showed the 'ideal' way to read the world especially in light of the harsh 'reality' of statistics, figures, and reports on the 'Deepwater Horizon *accident* of 2010' (as indicated on the site; emphasis ours). But what is the main plot emanating from the website story in the 8-year span of the study and who are the protagonists?

Initially, we see the story of an ideologically green company that does all it can to work for conservation and sustainability. 'Reading' from left to right, we 'read' a story of a corporate commitment that should be taken for granted (left side of the site), while the only route that can be taken to accomplish stated goals (center) is by innovation (right side). The ambiguity of the images shown, as well as the detachment of the viewer to these (described above), captures the idea that Nature is supreme, abstract, and inviting both 'teller' and 'listener' to attribute their

own roles in this story (Boje, 1994). Nature is found literally and metaphorically at the center of the BP story, emphasizing corporate commitment, while the viewer is drawn to a conservation discourse with accompanying photos tacitly highlighting the importance of it. The goal is, after all, clear: 'No damage to the environment.' Here, we see what Boje (1994: 440) describes as an 'alternative model of living ... exemplified by the 'Greening the Corporation' movement' which reminds, he says, of 'pre-modern storytelling ... a mythic and spiritual journey dispatching and delegating traditional archetypes ...' (p. 439). Interestingly, in our case, in a twist of this quasi-spiritual moral tale, the company is not defending Nature-Mother Earth *against* industrial progress but *with* industrial progress as the only way toward sustainability. After all, the main 'challenge' of the company, as we are told by the most prominent caption, is to achieve 'no damage to the environment' while 'supporting growth and social development around the world' *with* its energy products.

When this plot could no longer be maintained once the 'given' commitment exploded literally overnight, an alternative *modernist* story was constructed 'dispatching and delegating a more bureaucratic and pragmatic 'cult of efficiency'' (Boje, 1994: 444) to explain the discrepancy. The protagonist changed from Nature to Science and a technical logic was highlighted through a clear, linear site/story. 'Reading' this story from top to bottom, we see that 'being a responsible corporate citizen' changes from a 'given' to the 'ideal,' while the idea of 'striving' toward this role is highlighted by an army of scientists in the photos. It seems that Science will not only drive the company to its goal, but it is what connects the 'ideal' to 'reality.' In fact, the section added in late 2014 titled 'related content' and referring to the Gulf of Mexico restoration after the 'accident' of 2010 seems to say that 'despite what happened, BP scientists and engineers who are hard at work, will help BP reach its responsibility.' BP's new role is more limited, downgraded to an aspiration and a 'belief' (in the company's 'positive role'), rather than the previous unwavering and given commitment to 'zero damage.' In addition, the change from 'Environment' to 'Sustainability' in the tab heading adds haziness to the commitment, as it now seems unclear what this sustainability encompasses (this section was titled briefly 'Environment and Society,' during which time the sinking took place). Perhaps the caption 'the best way for BP to achieve *sustainable* success as a company is to act in the long-term interests of the shareholders' is an indication to the company's new definition of 'sustainability'—sustainability as in 'sustainable success' rather than environmental sustainability which is what was clearly stated between 2006 and 2010.

We see BP turning to what Boje (1994) describes as a modernist type of discourse: one that seeks 'to tame pre-modern mythical passion,' while elevating faith in reason to 'a level at which it becomes equated with progress' (p. 444). The logic of the new story is technical and relationships among people or to nature become 'very functional and unemotional' (Parker, 1992: 3). So, while on one hand, the photographs are intimate close-ups of people working, the intimacy felt is to the *work* that is being conducted, rather than to the people as part of nature. The feeling of 'being right there' that is invoked (and discussed above) has more to do with being part of the company (Elliott and Robinson, 2011) and less with the humanity of the workers; in other words, we know nothing about these people other than the fact that they are working hard for the corporate ideal to be 'a world class operator, a responsible corporate citizen.'

Boje (1994) also writes that within a modernist perspective,

People are gazed by all manner of technology and scientific gadgetry to test, inspect, monitor and gaze their performance to ensure it follows scripted norms. Industrialists and entrepreneurs learn just enough science to grab social control, to translate their interest into more efficient processes, and to retranslated human variation into system parameters. One learns how to subordinate one's body and soul to the master discourse of machine. There is a discursive division of labor, into horizontal and vertical cells of discourse.

The learning is disciplined but not innovative, orderly not profound. It involves large numbers of people, but is not open to too many different points of view, especially views from people at the margins. (p. 447)

We see that the visual grammar of the 2010–2014 website—through its *orderly* (horizontal and vertical) photos of a specific group of individuals, to whom we remain detached but who represent a *scripted* performance of *efficient processes*, their *bodies and souls* subordinated to *machinery and gadgetry*—accurately constructs this new, modernist story.

The liquid stories that websites tell

Organizations do not just tell stories, they *are* the stories that come out of the act of communication itself (Taylor et al., 2002: 318). As Boje (1995) notes, stories do not have a static meaning because *storytelling*, through its interpretive power, performs a broad array of active functions within the organization, including sustaining, defining, and redefining its image, inwardly and outwardly. So, what can we learn initially about BP and then about corporate hypocrisy and, more generally, about corporate power and responsibility through the *change* in the website story told?

Above, we explained how on a first reading of the website story before and after Deepwater Horizon, we located a change in the narrative reflecting a shift from a pre-modern to a modernist organizational discourse. At the same time, that the initial plot, protagonists and emotions *change*, it is not that they *disappear*; it is more that they ‘get shifted between foreground and background’ (Boje, 1995: 1001). In other words, in a second reading of the BP story/stories, we find that it is not that Nature, the protagonist of the pre-disaster website, vanished in the later story; rather, it withdrew into the *green* background, exchanging places with Science. Science, initially in a supporting role, moved to the foreground and roles were reversed: in the pre-disaster plot, Nature was defended by BP *with* industrial progress and new scientific products (Science); in the post-disaster plot, Science shows the ‘ideal’ way through which to read the world (Nature). Sustainability, another protagonist in the initial story, does not disappear either, but gets redefined from sustainability that is ‘environment-centric’ to one that is ‘stakeholder-centric’ (Kassinis, 2012)—what we saw as ‘sustainable success’—so again shifting roles and prominence. And, the color green remains as the literal and metaphorical backdrop of all that is happening, even if the meaning of ‘greenness’ changes from ideology to innocence. Thus, while we notice a change in the visual story told, we also see that, in the end, pre-modernist and modernist discourses ‘reorganize and reterritorialize their rival in ways that reconstruct business as usual’ (Boje, 1995: 1002).

In his analysis of Disney as ‘Tamara-land,’ Boje (1995) describes how the official ‘happy’ Disney story was placed alongside the marginal and excluded stories of demands, strikes, and oppression, thereby morphing into a new story. Here, BP struggles to deliver a ‘good’ story for those navigating the website or, more generally, those that matter—shareholders, customers, employees, competitors, citizens, and others affected by the oil spill—in light of the disaster. BP’s story after Deepwater Horizon was in distress, interrupted, and seemingly incoherent. The story had to unfold ‘in the moment’ as events and facts contradicted the organizational story itself (Gabriel, 1991). So, the story changes, shifts, and flows to account for and accommodate disruptive change. A story told must, after all, make sense to those who listen (or in our case ‘see’) so that it can be re-told.

It is not, however, that one ‘solid’ story replaces another; it is that one story flows into another, the various pieces that make up the story shifting provisionally into foreground or background. Even if the storytelling organization seeks to ‘collapse everything to one grand narrative’ (Boje, 1995: 1000), or to build a ‘hegemonic story that silences all other competing stories’ (Boje et al., 1999: 343) through the grammar of the website, real-time events necessitate a story that flows, a

liquid story that is continuously constructed, re-constructed, and co-constructed, as much as it is negotiated and re-negotiated.

We suggest that BP's 'liquid' website story reflects today's 'liquid world' (Bauman et al., 2015). If organizations *are* or become the stories they tell, then as organizational stories are constructed and re-constructed continuously, organizations too are continuously constructed and re-constructed, 'slippery, shifty, evasive' (Bauman, 2000: 14). This evasiveness, however, may become an 'asset of power' (Bauman, 2000: 13). We see corporate power enhanced through the 'liquid story' in two ways. First, we locate a mobile, transient, shifty, slippery, 'fugitive power' emanating from the lack of solid commitment to a single story of responsibility (Bauman, 2000: 14). But there is also another aspect of corporate power enabled through website navigation, which is perhaps even more problematic when discussing hypocrisy. As there is not one but many journeys when navigating a website, the story told by the company inevitably involves the user in ways that other texts do not; as such, the story created during one's navigation is both 'co-told' and continuously 'co-constructed,' further 'liquify-ing' the organization and spreading its power. As users make decisions where to 'click' next, they/we feel an affinity to the meaning enacted, a sense of ownership of the story told through their/our, literally, hands-on construction. Perhaps this is what we too experienced in our pre-2010 research. Engulfed in the corporate rationale, we came to justify corporate hypocrisy, inadvertent accomplices in the construction of the hypocritical story. We suggest that this experience is accurately captured by what Bauman (2003) describes as the 'liquid power' of the organization—'the art of escape and disengagement from all forms of social responsibility' (p. 119). Paradoxically then, website stories, as liquid as they may be, help to *solidify* corporate liquid power.

Concluding comments

In this article, we explored the storytelling power of a corporate website during times of distress, by applying a visual semiotic method of analysis to data gathered from the BP website before and after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. Using previous work on organizational storytelling and the concept of 'liquidity' to make sense of our findings, we argued that in the case examined, the 'liquid' story told via the corporate website enhanced BP's 'liquid power' and, possibly, assisted in its image recovery. Fully aware of our own role in the co-construction and telling of the 'story of the story,' our work seeks to contribute not only to disentangling how the non-committal organization of liquid modernity is potentially assembled—word by word, image by image, click by click, and story by story—but also to beginning a discussion on the role of website users in the formulation of a 'narrative contract,' a connection that may unwittingly assist corporate misdoings.

As glum as our findings may seem, we believe that they can add to the manager's 'toolkit for the interregnum' as Kostera says (in Bauman et al., 2015: 139) and have powerful implications for management learning. In this study, we focused on the 'darker side' of management and organizations. But, we also hinted at a hopeful way out of the current 'culture of uncared' that Weintrobe describes (in Bauman et al., 2015): the website user need not be a 'tourist' and thereby accomplice in hypocritical corporate storytelling (p. 137). In a 'twist' of our story, we must acknowledge that the power the user has in this co-construction can also enable 'self-management' (Bauman et al., 2015: 125). Kostera (2014), for example, has written that there are alternative ways of (self)management and (self)organizing; she envisions caring, social organizations in which people/citizens are not bound by corporate power structures and exhibit both the responsibility and the authority necessary to accomplish tasks without outside supervision. In a similar light, we argue that being aware of the multiple manifestations of corporate liquid power, as well as of our own responsibility *and* power to hold organizations accountable for their misdoings, is important in creating and

sustaining these new forms of organizing. It may be a small step, but we can start with comprehending and appreciating our own role in website stories.

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Note

1. *Tamara* is a Hollywood play where the audience is a co-creator of the story/stories told in a series of different fora, by chasing the actors and actresses of the play from one room to the next.

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