Understanding the Commercial Field of Sustainability Communications

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2012

Daniel Welch

School of Social Sciences (Sociology)
## Contents

Figures and Tables .................................................................................................................. 8

Abstract .................................................................................................................................... 9

Declaration ............................................................................................................................... 10

Copyright Statement .............................................................................................................. 10

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... 11

PART ONE ............................................................................................................................... 13

Chapter One ........................................................................................................................... 13

1.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 13

1.2 Structure of the Thesis .................................................................................................... 17

Chapter Two: Theoretical Perspectives ............................................................................... 20

2.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 20

2.2 Theories of Practice ......................................................................................................... 20

2.2.1 Entity and Performance .............................................................................................. 23

2.2.2 Larger Phenomena ....................................................................................................... 24

2.2.3 Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 26

2.3 The Sociology of Sustainable Consumption .................................................................. 26

2.4 Economy and Society ..................................................................................................... 30

2.4.1 Cultural Intermediaries ............................................................................................... 30

2.4.2 Cultural Economy and Performativity ......................................................................... 34

2.4.3 Governmentality and Consumer Co-production ......................................................... 36

2.5 Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 38

Chapter 3: Researching Sustainability Communications ..................................................... 39

3.1 Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 39

3.2 Research Methods .......................................................................................................... 41

3.2.1 A Note on Ethics .......................................................................................................... 42

3.2.2 A Note on Presentation ............................................................................................... 43
3.2.1 Ethnography, Participant Observation and Fieldwork ................................................. 43
3.2.2 Key Informant Interviews ......................................................................................... 47
3.2.3 Documentary Sources and Practitioner Literature .................................................. 51
3.2.4 Events and Online Forums ....................................................................................... 55
3.2.5 Mapping the Market ................................................................................................. 56
3.3 Analysis ....................................................................................................................... 57
3.4 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 59

PART TWO ......................................................................................................................... 61

Chapter Four: A Genealogy of Sustainability Communications ........................................ 61

4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 61
4.2 Environmentalism and Ethical Consumption ............................................................... 62
  4.2.1 The Rise of the Discourse of Sustainable Development ....................................... 63
  4.2.2 Market Campaigns and Ethical Consumption ....................................................... 69
4.3 The Rise of Corporate Social Responsibility ............................................................... 73
  4.3.1 The Institutionalisation of CSR .......................................................................... 75
4.4 The Rise of Brand Management .................................................................................. 78
  4.4.1 The Institutionalisation of Brand Management .................................................... 80
4.5 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 84

Chapter Five: The Rise of the Sustainability Communications Agency Market ............... 86

5.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 86
5.2 The Invention of Sustainability Communications ....................................................... 86
  5.2 Discourse and Practice in the Emerging Market ...................................................... 93
5.3 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 97

Chapter Six: The Sustainability Communications Agency Market ..................................... 98

6.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 98
6.2 The Structure of the Market ....................................................................................... 98
6.3 What Sustainability Communications Agencies Do .................................................. 103
6.4 Managing Strategic Ambiguity .......................................................... 106
6.5 Discursive Dynamics of the Field ..................................................... 112
6.6 Conclusion......................................................................................... 114

Chapter Seven: Doing Sustainability Communications ................................ 115
7.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 115
7.2 Portrait of a Sustainability Communications Agency ................................115
7.3 The Sustainability Communications Practice Complex .......................... 120
  7.3.1 Expert Knowledge Practices ....................................................... 121
  7.3.2 What integrates Sustainability Communications Practices? ............ 122
  7.3.3 An Object of Beauty .................................................................... 125
7.4 The Normative Project of Sustainability Communications ....................... 126
7.5 Conclusion ......................................................................................... 128

Chapter Eight: Doing Sustainability Communications II Writing a Sustainability Report ........ 129
8.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 129
8.2 Northlands ...................................................................................... 129
  8.2.1 ‘Northlands’ Values’ ................................................................. 130
8.3 The Scoping Study and Sustainability Strategy ...................................... 132
8.4 The Sustainability Report ................................................................. 138
8.5 Conclusion ......................................................................................... 144

PART THREE .......................................................................................... 146

Chapter Nine: Imagining the Sustainable Consumer .................................... 146
9.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 146
9.2 Creating Consumers of Sustainability .................................................. 148
9.3 Imagining the Consumer: the King in his Kingdom, Serfs in the Mass ........ 150
9.4 ‘Everyday Experts’ or the ‘Ethical Consumer Canard’? ......................... 154
9.5 The Role of the Consumer in Sustainable Consumption ....................... 157
9.6 Sustainability Communications and the Consumer .............................. 160
11.2.1 The Marketisation of Communication? .............................................................. 219

11.3 Cultural Intermediation ...................................................................................... 222

11.3 Sustainable Consumption ................................................................................ 225

11.5 Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 226

Appendices ................................................................................................................ 230

Appendix I: Key Informant Profiles ........................................................................ 230

Appendix II: Online Forums and Discussion Groups ................................................ 239

Appendix III: Some Key Events in the Development of Corporate Sustainability in the UK (1984-2001) .................................................................................................................. 241

Appendix IV: Work Undertaken by the Agency in a Typical Week ........................... 243

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 247

Word Count: 79,794
Figures and Tables

Figures

Fig. 1 The sustainability communications field……………………………………………………………………………p.40
Fig. 2 Global CSR report production 1992-2011.................................................................................................p.76
Fig. 3 Core types of sustainability communications............................................................................................p.91
Fig. 4 Overlapping practice sets amongst organisations in the consultancy market.................................p.99
Fig. 5 Client relationships in the sustainability communications agency market.................................p.105
Fig. 6 Shell advert censured by the ASA in 2007.........................................................................................p.109
Fig. 7 Northlands ‘Brand Values’. ......................................................................................................................p.130
Fig. 8 Slides from Scoping Study presentation—commercial property sector analysis.........................p.132
Fig. 9 Enacting isomorphism—‘best practice’ slides from Scoping Study presentation..................p.136
Fig. 10 Flat plan brainstorm.................................................................................................................................p.138
Fig. 11 First iteration of the flat plan..................................................................................................................p.140
Fig. 12 Detail of third iteration of the flat plan.................................................................................................p.141
Fig. 13 ‘Amanda’—concept design for commuter cycling campaign..............................................................p.162
Fig. 14 Patagonia advert........................................................................................................................................p.165
Fig. 15 Patagonia website pledge between company and ‘citizen-consumer’.............................................p.166
Fig. 16 Product Analyser on Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan website.....................................................p.169

Tables

Table 1. “What are the key reasons for communicating your sustainability initiatives?” ........p.177
Abstract

The University of Manchester

Daniel Welch

Doctor of Philosophy

Understanding the Commercial Field of Sustainability Communications (October 2012)

The commercial field of sustainability communications encompasses ground previously demarcated between the fields of Corporate Social Responsibility on the one hand, and marketing, advertising and public relations on the other. This thesis examines the formation and development of this novel field of cultural production and its significance for sustainable consumption and corporate sustainability.

The research is orientated by practice theory and draws on participant observation within a sustainability communications agency, interviews and documentary analysis. The heuristic value of practice theory for the study of sustainable consumption is now well established in the context of end-use consumption but is unexplored in the context of commercial sustainability communications. Equally, sustainability communications has been neglected by the field of cultural economy.

The key concern is with cultural intermediaries and their capacity or otherwise to instantiate their own mores, understandings and practices in the social world. I address this in terms of sustainability and draw on the idea of performativity to approach commercial sustainability communications as a performative complex of practices. Furthermore, the research aims to problematise the place of ‘the consumer’ in discourses of sustainable consumption.

I produce a genealogy of sustainability communications and an account of the development and contemporary constitution of the associated agency market. I suggest that a defining role that the market plays is the management of the ‘strategic ambiguity’ of sustainability. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews I identify elements that integrate practices into the complex of sustainability communications and examine its normative orientations. Cultural intermediation is shown to take place through, firstly, the diffusion of practices and practice elements. Secondly, it occurs through attempts to instantiate ‘the sustainable consumer’. Models of the consumer at work in sustainability communications are analysed and different modes of instantiation of ‘the sustainable consumer’ identified. Thirdly, it takes place through articulating sustainability with brands. I explore three arenas in which sustainability communications articulates brand and sustainability: what I identify as the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption; the cultural politics of work; and lastly, the public sphere.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

Copyright Statement

i. The author of this thesis (including any appendices and/or schedules to this thesis) owns certain copyright or related rights in it (the “Copyright”) and s/he has given The University of Manchester certain rights to use such Copyright, including for administrative purposes.

ii. Copies of this thesis, either in full or in extracts and whether in hard or electronic copy, may be made only in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (as amended) and regulations issued under it or, where appropriate, in accordance with licensing agreements which the University has from time to time. This page must form part of any such copies made.

iii. The ownership of certain Copyright, patents, designs, trade marks and other intellectual property (the “Intellectual Property”) and any reproductions of copyright works in the thesis, for example graphs and tables (“Reproductions”), which may be described in this thesis, may not be owned by the author and may be owned by third parties. Such Intellectual Property and Reproductions cannot and must not be made available for use without the prior written permission of the owner(s) of the relevant Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions.

iv. Further information on the conditions under which disclosure, publication and commercialisation of this thesis, the Copyright and any Intellectual Property and/or Reproductions described in it may take place is available in the University IP Policy (see http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/medialibrary/policies/intellectual-property.pdf), in any relevant Thesis restriction declarations deposited in the University Library, The University Library’s regulations (see http://www.manchester.ac.uk/library/aboutus/regulations) and in The University’s policy on presentation of Theses.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous financial support of the Sustainable Consumption Institute (SCI) of the University of Manchester. I would like to thank Colin Hughes and Sally Randles for all their work for the Centre of Doctoral Training at the SCI. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues in the first cohort at the Centre, with whom I have worked over the last four years, and wish them all the best in their endeavours.

Above all I would like to thank Dale Southerton and Alan Warde for their invaluable advice, support, good humour, intellectual inspiration—and considerable patience in the final months of writing up. I am privileged to have had them as supervisors. I would also like to thank Nick Thoburn (and Sally again) for extremely useful guidance in my annual reviews. David Smith kindly reviewed several chapters, offering helpful advice and a considerable boon to morale in the later stages of writing up, for which I am extremely grateful. Thanks also to Sue Huzar at the SCI and Ann Cronley in the School of Social Sciences for consistent help with administrative hurdles.

A big thanks goes to Steve Connor for facilitating the fieldwork. I am grateful to everyone at the Agency where I undertook my fieldwork, who made the experience both valuable and enjoyable. Thanks also to all my key informants, who were good enough to take time out of busy schedules to provide me with interviews.

I would like to thank my parents for their unstinting support over the years—and for inculcating an abiding love of learning. For them this thesis has been a long time coming. And much appreciation also goes to Linda Smith for all the help and support.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife Zoë for all her support, for putting up with the long hours, and for letting me do the thing in the first place, when it would not have been unreasonable to suggest that there were other priorities than a four year intellectual project offering uncertain rewards. And to my son Billy, who was born in the second year of the PhD, thanks for being the best distraction imaginable.
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of

Patrick W. Welch

(1965-2008)

Micromentalist
PART ONE

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

Around the turn of the millennium a handful of pioneering communication agencies began turning the ‘dark arts’ of marketing to the improbable end of communicating sustainable development. By the end of the decade ‘sustainability communications’ had become a fully fledged industry, with the biggest names in global commercial communications, like Saatchi & Saatchi and Ogilvy & Mathers, competing for a huge market. In 1998 Royal Dutch Shell became the first multinational company to produce a fully fledged Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report. In 2008 alone, the year I began my research, 4,118 CSR reports were produced. In 2011 that figure had increased to 5,875 (CorporateRegister, 2012).

CSR, creative or marketing communications and campaign communications represent different poles of this hybrid field, but it is increasingly integrated and recognised as a field in its own right. A recent collection showcasing international examples of visual sustainability communications defines it as comprising “all communicative actions related to social and ecological commitment, and to the interrelations of ecological, social and economic perspectives, with the aim of driving the economy and society forward in the direction of sustainability” (Klanten et al, 2012: 2).

Today, an aspiring young marketing student could download from the UN Environment Programme’s website Sustainability Communications: A Toolkit for Marketing & Advertising Courses (UNEP, 2006) and buy a textbook on Sustainability Marketing (Belz and Peattie, 2009). She could hope to go on to work for something called a sustainability communications agency.

The subject of this thesis is the formation, reproduction and effects of this novel commercial field, and its significance for discourses and practices of sustainable consumption and corporate sustainability.¹ The significance of the field for understanding the dynamics of those discourses and practices requires an in-depth examination of how it has developed over time.

---

¹ By corporate sustainability I refer to what we might call ‘actually existing sustainability’. I define corporate sustainability as:

- Innovation of production processes and consumption practices internal to the firm, with an aim to reduce the environmental impact of business processes and operations.
practices has been almost entirely unexplored by social science. Despite the growth of the sociology of sustainable consumption very little attention has been paid to the commercial field whose job it is to communicate sustainability or to the role it plays in mediating discourses and practices of sustainability.²

One of my contentions is that the sustainability communications field can act as a lens with which to examine certain dynamics of the discourse and practices of corporate sustainability, such as the use to which sustainability is put in the discourse of work, in the public sphere and in an emerging discourse I call corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption. In each of these areas brand plays a decisive role. Sustainability has arisen as a business issue within much the same time frame that brand management has come to achieve its central position for much of the corporate world. That

- Innovation in practices of both production and consumption external to the firm, both within the firm’s supply chain and innovation in products and services to facilitate consumer practices of sustainability; with an aim to reduce environmental impact and improve social conditions, such as programmes of implementing labour rights within the supply chain.

- Innovation in institutional and organisational arrangements; both intra-organisational, to facilitate practices of sustainability and inter-organisational (e.g. multi-stakeholder groups, strategic alliances, multi-business organisations)

- Practices of accounting, auditing, measuring and reporting social and environmental inputs and outputs.

- Practices of communicating and representing sustainability – including, inter alia, behavioural change communications (both internal and external to the firm), employee engagement programmes, marketing, advertising, and CSR reporting.

- Discourse relating to all of the above.

² While there is a huge literature on CSR (see Section 4.3) I have not found work addressing the commercial field of sustainability communications specifically. Critical approaches to CSR tend to address CSR discourse (e.g. Livesey, and Kearns, 2002; Kazmi et al, 2012) or critique CSR as a project (e.g. Aras and Crowther, 2008; Enoch, 2010) but neglect the role of CSR consultancies (Young et al produced a study of the consultancy market in 2003). There is also a much smaller critical literature addressing the ‘green marketing’ bandwagon of the 1990s (e.g. Oyewole, 2001; Merilänen, 2000). A recent collection Sustainability Communication: Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Theoretical Foundation (Godeman and Michelsen (ed.), 2012) is typical of current approaches in ignoring the aspect of cultural production. The Journal of Sustainability Communication was published 2006-09 before merging with Journal of Environmental Communication; while of interest in combining contributions from both academics and practitioners, again the perspective of cultural production was neglected. Moor (2012) has recently addressed the institutionalisation of social marketing in the UK. Practitioner literature is discussed in Section 3.2.3.
there should be some co-evolution between the discourses and practices of the two should therefore come as no surprise. But the intimacies between sustainability and brand are far greater than coincidence.

The field of commercial sustainability communications is also of interest in its own right. The key focus of the thesis is with the role of cultural intermediaries and their capacity or otherwise to instantiate their own mores, predilections, beliefs and practices in the social world. I consider the practitioners of the field as cultural intermediaries of sustainability.

I began with a naive question. For Bourdieu the new cultural intermediaries formed the “ethical avant garde” of the new consumer capitalism (1984: 356). If they had such power, the vanguard of unsustainable consumerism, what then was the power of the new cultural intermediaries of sustainability?

In the foreword to a 2005 publication, written by pioneering sustainability communications agency Futerra, for the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), the Head of the UNEP extolled the power of creative communication campaigns to “make sustainable lifestyles fashionable and ‘cool’” (UNEP/Futerra, 2005: 6). Two years later, I would hear Adrian Hosford, Director of Corporate Responsibility at BT address an assembly of the company’s brand marketers and ‘agency people’. “Marketing,” he said, “has made unsustainable lifestyles sexy – it is now the responsibility of marketing to make sustainable lifestyles sexy.” Does marketing have that capacity?

Sociology has generally addressed the field of commercial communications through versions of the cultural intermediary thesis (e.g. Cronin, 2004b; Lury, 2004; McFall, 2002; Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996; Moor, 2007; Nixon, 1996, 1997, 2003; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001; Slater, 2002a, 2002b; Soar, 2002). My research explores the utility of this thesis for understanding the ways in which the sustainability communications field mediates understandings of sustainability and sustainable consumption. If the promise of cultural sociology is to understand how culture shapes action what can an exploration of this novel field of cultural production, its institutional organisation and everyday practices, contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of sustainable consumption?

This thesis is located within the sociology of sustainable consumption and the diffuse field of cultural economy. Theories of practice have been productively mobilised by both fields.

The heuristic value of practice theory for the study of sustainable consumption is now well established in the context of end-use consumption (e.g. Evans et al., 2012; Halkier, 2010; Halkier et al, 2011; Shove, 2006; Warde and Southerton, 2012; McMeekin and Southerton, 2012). However, its
value is unexplored in the context of commercial sustainability communications. I suggest the sociological account of the overall arena of sustainable consumption is empirically deficient if it does not encompass an understanding of the role and dynamics of the field of sustainability communications. This is the case not least because sustainability communications are themselves purposive interventions into the arena of sustainable consumption. Furthermore, the research has the wider aim of problematising the place of ‘the consumer’ in discourses of sustainable consumption.

With its focus on “ordinary consumption” (Gronow and Warde, 2001) and consumption as a moment in practices which accomplish the reproduction of everyday life (Warde, 2005), there is a danger that the sociology of sustainable consumption throws out the baby of cultural intermediation with the bath water of earlier ‘culturalist’ accounts of consumption. Perhaps in reaction to the postmodern turn—in which consumption as practice virtually disappeared from an account of consumer culture fixated upon representation and the semioticisation of the commodity—contemporary, practice based accounts of consumption often minimise the role of marketing and mass media. Cultural representations are an important way in which practices are co-ordinated and clearly commercially produced communications about sustainability are among them.

Thus far contributions to the sociology of sustainable consumption have generally sought to analyse social action in order to better understand how interventions conducive to the furthering of the ‘sustainability agenda’ may come about (e.g. Evans et al, 2012; Hargreaves, 2011; Thogersen and Crompton, 2009; Shove, 2010a, 2010b; Shove and Walker, 2010; Southerton and McMeekin, 2012; Southerton et al., 2004). This is crucially important work. But there is also the task of undertaking sociological description and analysis of the novel social practices that already happen in the name of sustainable consumption, and sustainability more broadly. This latter project, to which my research aims to contribute, is far from disconnected from the former. For if we are to understand the dynamics through which transitions towards greater sustainability may be achieved we must understand the dynamics of those social phenomena already operating under the name of sustainability, in which crowded milieu sustainability interventions must compete.

The cultural norms at issue in sustainable consumption are perhaps unusual in contemporary culture in the degree to which they are so explicitly the site of intervention of purposive programmes of cultural engineering on the part of government, civil society organisations, campaign groups, and,

---

3 Exceptions include Shove and Pantzar (2005), Shove and Araujo (2010) and Halkier (2010).
increasingly, capitalist corporations. Moreover, mass media are willing vectors of such programmes. The role of the field of commercial sustainability communications is paramount in the construction and dissemination of such programmes.

My focus is chiefly the burgeoning market of communication agencies proffering sustainability communication services, both due to the practical necessity of delimiting the subject matter and as the site in which I contend issues of cultural intermediation may be most productively addressed. It is the site within the wider field of sustainability communications which affords the actors within it the most degree of autonomy, and which is most resonant with the existing literature on cultural intermediaries. A practice approach to this field addresses how the practices of commercial sustainability communications are historically constituted and currently performed and how this constitution and performance impacts social orders of more or less sustainable consumption. I use participant observation, documentary analysis and interviews to explore this novel commercial field of cultural production.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part One introduces the thesis and addresses its theoretical orientations (Chapter Two) and the research questions and methods (Chapter Three). Part Two examines the historical development of the commercial field (Chapters Four and Five), the contemporary sustainability communications agency market (Chapter Five), and presents findings from the fieldwork (Chapters Seven and Eight). Part Three extends the scope of the research to address, firstly, framings of ‘the consumer’ within sustainability communications (Chapter Nine), and secondly, articulations between sustainability and brand (Chapter Ten), before offering conclusions and further reflections (Chapter Eleven).

Part One

In Chapter Two I provide a brief overview of the central theoretical commitment of the thesis to the social ontology of practice theory, largely drawing on the work of Theodore Schatzki, and go on to map out the key contributions of practice theory to the burgeoning sociology of sustainable consumption. I then place the thesis within three debates within cultural sociology. Firstly, that of the role played by cultural intermediaries in contemporary consumer capitalism. Secondly, I note a central orientation of cultural economy in the figure of performativity and suggest that sustainability communications can be usefully approached in a performative idiom. Lastly, I introduce the Foucauldian problematic of governmentality.
In Chapter Three I map out my key research questions and discuss the methods used to research the thesis: participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis. I also use the discussion of documentary sources to introduce the field.

**Part Two**

In Chapter Four I begin to address the research questions with a historical account of three inter-related developments crucial to the understanding of the emergence of sustainability communications. Firstly, I examine the diffusion of a systems ecology understanding from environmentalism via the discourse of sustainable development to the discourse of corporate sustainability. I then explore how strategic interventions on the part of NGOs were central in the institutionalisation of CSR. I further suggest these interventions, along with the discourse of sustainable development, were instrumental in the problematisation of consumption, which in turn is fundamental to the development of the field of sustainability communications. Lastly, I chart the rise of brand communications, which I suggest have come to allow corporations to operationalise the problematisation of consumption for their own ends – a theme to which I return in Chapter Ten.

I then examine in Chapter Five the rise of the sustainability communications agency market, within the context of the above developments and explore how the practice complex began to cohere. Here I begin to draw on interview material as well as documentary sources. In Chapter Six I discuss the structure of the contemporary market, its practices and discursive dynamics. I argue that a defining feature is its role in the management of the “strategic ambiguity” of sustainability, as a mediating function for the emergent coalition of corporate sustainability (Wexler, 2009).

In Chapter Seven I draw on fieldwork to provide a portrait of the fieldwork agency and suggest how the practice complex is integrated through the circulation of procedures and understandings. I suggest that in order to understand the performativity of sustainability communications, and thus its role in cultural intermediation, we must understand its integration as a complex. In Chapter Eight, again drawing on fieldwork, I examine the intermediating role practitioners play as carriers of practices, enacting institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). I demonstrate this through the example of the production of a CSR report and argue that while we witness conflicts and constraints these do not, contrary to expectations, take the form of discursive struggles over sustainability.
Part Three

In Chapters Nine and Ten I address further processes through which the practice complex shapes understandings and practices of sustainability. Chapter Nine addresses how sustainability communications mobilises and frames the subject of consumption. We find multiple models of that subject at work. I suggest instances where the subject is articulated within a ‘naive’ practice approach to consumption, as well as those where it defaults to the sovereign consumer. I also examine analytically distinct modes through which ‘the sustainable consumer’ is instantiated.

Chapter Ten is an extended chapter in three sections that explores ways in which sustainability communications intertwines notions of brand and sustainability. The first section addresses what I call the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, which I suggest frames an emerging ethical project of commercial communications. The second section addresses sustainability as a resource mobilised within the cultural politics of work. I suggest sustainability is emerging as a legitimation discourse of capitalism. In the third section I turn to the issue of the public sphere, and the mobilisation of sustainability there as a resource for brands as they seek to become vehicles for ‘citizen-consumer’ concerns.

In Chapter Eleven I summarise responses to the research questions and offer further reflections and avenues for future research. I argue that sustainability communications in its everyday enactments negotiates the normative terrain of the critique of promotionalism (e.g. Wernick, 1991). I suggest normative critiques that enact boundary work between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sustainabilities (Amsler, 2009) offer little purchase on the forms of cultural intermediation observed in the research. The key forms of intermediation I identify are summarised as: engagement in processes of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983); management of the “strategic ambiguity” of sustainability (Wexler, 2009); instantiations of ‘the sustainable consumer’; and imbrications of brand and sustainability—in forms of governmentality, an emerging legitimation discourse for capitalism and in the “promotional public sphere” (Knight, 2010).
Chapter Two: Theoretical Perspectives

“[T]here is only one way to understand social events, processes, and changes – by uncovering and studying their details.” (Schatzki, 2011: 24)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an account of the thesis’ theoretical orientation and locate the thesis within key debates within cultural sociology. It does not aspire to provide a full literature review of these theoretical positions, merely an account sufficient to the work to which these theoretical orientations are put. In the first section I give a brief account of the thesis’ central theoretical orientation – practice theory – and its deployment in the sociology of sustainable consumption. It is entirely possible to combine a practice theory approach with other theoretical concepts relevant to the empirical field, as long as they are consistent with the ontological premises of practice theory (Halkier, 2010: 32). The second section therefore moves on to address certain key concepts and debates relevant to the field.

2.2 Theories of Practice

My central theoretical commitment is to the social ontology of practice theory. While theories of practice display a certain family resemblance it has become almost routine to acknowledge the heterogeneity amongst them. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Garfinkel, Lyotard, Bourdieu, late Foucault, Giddens, Taylor, Latour, and Butler are commonly evoked as intellectual resources. That notwithstanding, there has been considerable work of synthesis over the last decade or so. Most notably Schatzki (1996, 2002) has rigorously elaborated a social ontology in dialogue with other practice theorists. Reckwitz (2002) has presented a synthesis (incorporating the early Schatzki), which maps an ‘ideal type’ practice theory in order to distinguish it from other forms of social and cultural theory. Warde (2005) has provided an “abridged account,” incorporating both Reckwitz and Schatzki into a programmatic synthesis with which to address the field of consumption. And most recently Shove et al (2012) have developed an avowedly “radically simplified” account of practice theory, the better to elucidate the complex dynamics of the emergence, persistence, diffusion, reproduction and disappearance of social practices.

Social order, Schatzki notes, is the pre-eminent concern of modern social thought (2001: 13). Cultural theories oppose both the utilitarian or rational choice models of social action and order and the classical sociological norm-orientated model of social action and order (i.e. Durkheim and
Parsons (Reckwitz, 2002: 245). By contrast, all cultural theories highlight symbolic structures of knowledge and “explain or understand action and social order by referring to symbolic and cognitive structures” (ibid.: 246). For cultural theories the locus of the social must be connected with these structures in some way. Reckwitz groups all cultural theories into four camps defined by that locus: mentalism locates it in the mind; textualism in discourse, symbols or signs; and intersubjectivism in interaction (ibid: 247-49). In the fourth camp what unites the heterogeneity of practice theories, by contrast, is the contention that social order and action is a feature of, and established through, the field of human practices. Moreover, “these accounts all undermine the traditional individual-nonindividual divide by availing themselves of features of both sides” (Schatzki, 2001: 14).

The promise of practice theory is to move beyond the problematic of structure and agency, and other dualisms – methodological individualism and holism, determinism and voluntarism, subject and object (Halkier et al., 2011: 3; Schatzki, 2001: 10; 2002: 125) – to “a novel picture of the social and human agency” (Reckwitz, 2002: 244). Practice theory stands opposed to hypostatized unities (Schatzki, 1996: 12), to a view of social order as regularity or stability (Schatzki, 2002: 14-16) and to a view of social action as generated by normative systems, conceptual schemes or cultural codes (Lizardo and Strand, 2010: 210). Practice theory implies no less than “a considerable shift in our perspective on body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process and the agent” (Reckwitz, 2002: 250).

Schatzki suggests that social order should not be thought of as regularities (2001:15) but as “arrangements of people, artefacts, organisms and things through and amid which social life transpires” (2002:22).⁴ Practices form the context in which social orders are established (Schatzki,

---

⁴ For Schatzki, practices subtend the meaning and/or identity of entities composing material arrangements (or social orders) (2011: 11). That is not to say that practice is the exclusive province of meaning; entities enjoy meaning through both their relations to one another in arrangements as well as through practices (2001: 43-47; 2002: 47; 2005, 47-54). Meaning here, as it relates to people in social arrangements is similar to a Foucauldian notion of subject position, which Schatzki is keen to stress does not equate to an overly linguistic understanding of the subject or of identity, which is also constituted through action (2002: 49; 2005: 50-52). Schatzki rejects actor-network theory’s extension of the category of actor to the non-human and locates non-human agency in arrangements not practices (2002: 71; 185-8). Schatzki does not, therefore, incorporate materiality into practices in the way Shove et al (2012; cf Shove and Pantzar, 2005) and others (e.g. Ropke, 2009) do. Where Shove et al (2012) talk of practices therefore this refers, in Schatzki’s terms, to practice-arrangement bundles.
Practices are the bundled activities, or “the organised nexus of action,” that one component of social orders – namely, people - perform (ibid.: 71). Practices are sets of “doings and sayings” – they involve both “practical activity and its representations” (Warde, 2005: 134). Thus in asking “What are the practices through which communications are produced?” we are necessarily asking “What do the practitioners understand by what they are doing?”

Firstly, Schatzki makes a distinction between simple practices that involve a single type of action and more complex practices. The former he calls “dispersed practices,” because they are dispersed throughout social life in much the same form – such as ‘describing,’ which presupposes an understanding of what a description is and how to perform one (2002: 88). The latter, Schatzki calls “integrated practices” because they involve the integration of a complex array of components. Hereafter I refer to these simply as practices. More often than not, practices are defined simply by being recognised as such in social life (Schatzki, 2002: 84; 2005: 51, n.79; Shove et al, 2012:121)

Thus some of the key practices within commercial communications include: graphic design; copywriting; video production; branding; communication strategy planning; production coordination; ‘brainstorming’; ‘pitching’ to a prospective client; and account management. Some of the practices that are more specific to sustainability communications include: CSR report writing; behaviour change communications; stakeholder communications; and employee engagement. And some that are quite central to running a sustainability communications agency but which are widely shared with other businesses include: meeting practices; scheduling practices; project management; accounting; business management practices, and so on.

In Schatzki’s scheme practices are organised through “(1) practical understandings, (2) rules, (3) a teleoaffective structure, and (4) general understandings” (Schatzki, 2002: 77). Practical understandings are a sense of how to go on with an activity, identify it as such-and-such activity or respond appropriately: “a skill or capacity that underlies activity” (ibid.: 79). Rules are “explicit formulations, principles, precepts, and instructions that enjoin, direct or remonstrate people to perform specific actions” (ibid.). Warde offers a useful inflexion by referring to this category as “procedures” (2005: 134). The difficult notion of “teleoaffective structure” refers to: “an array of

---

5 The differentiation of practices from orders is analytical, not ontological (Schatzki, 2002: 106).
ends, projects, uses (of things), and even emotions that are acceptable or prescribed for participants in the practice” (Schatzki, 2005: 472). Teleaffective structures are thus normatively ordered. The ends or projects that practitioners may pursue (such as, for example the pursuit of profit, or the project of furthering sustainable development) and the emotions and moods that they may express in pursuit of a practice are normatively delimited; certain things may be obligatory, others acceptable, others still, controversial (Schatzki, 2002: 80-83). Schatzki notes that the complexity of teleological ordering and degree of affective ordering of practices varies greatly. Lastly, general understandings are common to many practices and condition the manner in which practices are carried out, as well as being expressed in their performance (Schatzki, 2002: 86). Schatzki gives the example of the Shakers’ view of labour as a sanctification of the earthly sphere; which conditioned the manner in which many of their labouring practices were carried out, as well as being explicitly formulated in doings and sayings (ibid.). This example demonstrates how such understandings may be important components of the self definition of groups.

While practices take centre stage as the key unit of analysis the individual does not disappear from view. Rather, individuals can be thought of as possessing individuality through the unique intersection of manifold practices which subtend them as individuals (Reckwitz, 2002: 256; Warde, 2005: 143). Individuals are the carriers of practice. Through individuals’ active combination and integration of the elements that make up practices, practices are performed and transformed (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002; Shove et al, 2012).

2.2.1 Entity and Performance

Shove et al. (2012) and Warde (2005) stress the useful analytical distinction between practice as entity and practice as performance. Practices-as-entities have a history – a trajectory, or path of development. Moreover, “that history will always be differentiated for the substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon...institutional arrangements” (Warde, 2005: 139). Thus in Chapter Four I trace the emergence of certain novel practices, such as CSR reporting, that are important to the development of the field of sustainability communications. We can trace the trajectory of CSR reporting as an entity, and its relation to other practice entities, such as branding. At the same time practices exist as performances, recursively related to their practice entities (Shove et al, 2012: 123). Thus in Chapter Eight I examine a specific instance of doing CSR reporting during my fieldwork.

Practices may overlap and elements be shared between them (Schatzki, 2002: 87). Shove et al (2012) also stress the relative independence of the trajectories of elements of practices from practices
themselves. This helps to foreground the dynamism through which practice entities come into being and are transformed. New practices may be said to emerge when new elements are combined into existing practices. Thus in Chapter Four I trace how an understanding of inter-relatedness derived from systems ecology moved from science, via environmentalism, to sectors of the corporate world, helping to engender new practices of corporate sustainability.

2.2.2 Larger Phenomena

Practices do not contrast with some other order of macro phenomena (see especially Schatzki, 2005; 2011). Practices organise the contexts in which people act, and as such may resemble the macro phenomena of more traditional social thought (Schatzki 2001:5). Macro phenomena exist, says Schatzki (summarising Coulter, 2001) “in and through their praxiological instantiations; that is, they exist primarily in and through the occasions when it is relevant and legitimate to characterize people and actions with macro categories” (Schatzki 2001:6). As Schatzki puts it:

“Social affairs display a certain high-level ontological sameness: in every instance, social phenomena consist of some slice or aspect of the plenum of practice-arrangement bundles.” (2011: 4)

For Schatzki larger phenomena are simply “bundles” of material arrangements and practices. ‘Bundling’ however is by no means simple, and stands for the myriad forms of relation between the evolving mesh of practices, practice components and material arrangements. Amongst the shapes of this mesh are, inter alia, “fragile and metamorphosing bundles of practice...larger nets containing multiple, closely knit, and overlapping bundles as knots [such as homogenous, geographically bounded communities]...spatially scattered confederations of linked and imbricated bundles [such as

---

6 A distinction should probably be made here between macro phenomena in the sense of large social entities, such as states and economies and “supersensible” phenomena commonly theorised as belonging to a macro-order, such as capital. I find unproblematic the notion that large social entities are ontologically undifferentiated from local or micro phenomena. I am however agnostic on the vexing question of the possibility of emergent phenomena arising from aggregate effects of practice-order interactions. Schatzki comments: “Another sort of nonlocal phenomenon comprises patterns in bundles and constellations, which are sometimes formulable in generalizations. Markets exhibit such a pattern...Much of what is called “the economy” consists of sums and measures of, as well as patterns in, practice-arrangement bundles” (2011: 30 n. iv). This would seem to beg the question whether there is not more to be said about such “patterning” beyond our capacity to generalise about its existence. For a reading of Marx’s “supersensible” phenomena—value, abstract labour and capital—as just such emergent results of practices see Pepperell (2010).
an industry]” (2002: 154) or a “constellation of bundles” such as a socio-technical regime (e.g. coal-generated electricity) (2011: 10). Such descriptions are never more than empirically informed generalisations, albeit they may operate at a high level of generality and be consistent over wide periods of time.

The emergence of a bundle: “... can involve, among other things, the coalescence of organized activities (including the crystallization of common rules, teleologies, and understandings) [and] the erection of links between previously unconnected practices or arrangements...The emergence of a bundle is the emergence of some new combination of doings, sayings, rules, teleologies, understandings, material arrangements, and relations between practices and arrangements” (Schatzki, 2011:7).

Shove et al (2012) make a distinction between loosely inter-related groups of practices (or “bundles” in Schatzki’s terminology), and more densely integrated sets of practices, which they designate “complexes”. These may be thought of as entities in their own right. Thus we may think of sustainability communications as a complex. Practitioners may do sustainability communications, rather than simply its constituent practices (2012: 86-7).

An organisation may be thought of as “an intentionally instituted and purpose-oriented configuration of interrelated human activities (or co-operation)” consisting of a configuration of bundles (Schatzki, 2011: 9; cf, 2005).

Throughout the thesis I refer to the field of sustainability communications. I use this term in an ordinary language sense, as practitioners within the field may talk of it, as opposed to a Bourdieusian or any other technical sense. Thus the field of sustainability communications is both an organisational field and a domain of inter-related practices. It exists because people both inside and outside of it believe that it exists, act ‘as if’ it exists and instantiate it in practice, but it is no more than the practice-arrangement bundles that compose it. I will go on to suggest some characteristics of the field that are analytically pertinent but these should be conceptualized as aspects of or shapes taken by inter-related practice-arrangements (Schatzki, 2005: 479).

---

7 Among the critical accounts that led me to reject the use of Bourdieusian field key were Bottero and Crossley (2011), Jenkins (1992), Schatzki (1997, 2002), and Warde (2004).
2.2.3 Conclusion

As Schatzki stresses, ontologies are not explanatory theories; they describe the basic character of social order and action (2002: xvi): “They do not specify general frameworks for explaining social phenomena, though they do provide explanatory resources and can also ground general pronouncements about explanation” (ibid). Moreover, ontology raises as many epistemological and methodological questions as it answers (see SPRG, 2012). Schatzki suggests that many epistemological questions, such as the meaning of components of social orders and the identity of practices, are answered through the action and language of everyday life (2005: 51, n. 79). However, “interest-relative demarcations” of social orders and practice-order complexes and discretion attending their representation remain in the purview of the analyst (Schatzki, 2002: 102).

While practice theory rejects hypostatised entities and social relations it does not eschew explanations of social life. It “explains outcomes by tracing the stream of events through which a process unfolds,” takes notions of path dependency seriously and allows for the mutation of the identity of the unit of analysis over time (Shove et al, 2012: 144). It suggests schematic pictures obscure more than they reveal (Schatzki, 2011: 22); but it does afford empirically informed overviews, detailed analysis of common dynamics in social life (e.g. Shove et al, 2012) and identification of complex causal interactions and recursive processes (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012).

I now turn to an area in which practice theory has been put to productive use – the study of consumption, and specifically the field of sustainable consumption.

2.3 The Sociology of Sustainable Consumption

I locate this thesis as a contribution to the growing field of the sociology of sustainable consumption (e.g. Evans, 2012; Evans et al, 2012; Foster et al, 2012; Jackson, 2006a; Randles and Warde, 2006; Shove and Walker, 2007; Shove and Warde, 2002; Southerton et al., 2004; McMeekin and Southerton, 2012; Spaargaren, 2004, 2011; Spaargaren and Oosterveer, 2010; Spaargaren and van Vliet, 2000; SPRG, 2012; Warde and Southerton, 2012; Zaccai, 2007), as well as to practice theory based approaches to ethical and political consumption (Barnett, et al, 2011; Halkier, 2010; Wheeler, 2012a, 2012b). Whilst the central object of my concern is not consumption itself, beyond the aforementioned positioning, a brief excursion into the analysis of consumption is required given both the prominent role that the problematisation of consumption plays in the field of sustainability.
communications and the relation between Bourdieu’s (1984) conception of the cultural intermediary and consumption.

The discourse of sustainable consumption emerged as part of the wider discourse of sustainable development. Agenda 21, the main policy document to emerge from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, called for “a better understanding of the role of consumption and how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns” (1992, 4.23). Chapter Four examines the role of the discourse of sustainable development in constituting the commercial field of sustainability communications. Sustainable consumption, and its relation to sustainable production, became the focus of international policy debates from the mid 1990s (see Jackson, 2006b; Robins and Roberts, [1998] 2006). Following the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, the Marrakech Process initiated a ten year research programme on sustainable consumption and production. And since the 2004 launch of the Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption, the UK has been at the forefront of policy related research into sustainable consumption. While policy remains dominated by understandings drawn from neo-classical economics, behavioural economics and social psychology (Evans, et al, 2012; Shove, 2010) practice theory has become a central intellectual resource for sociological thinking addressing sustainable consumption.

Sustainable consumption cannot be understood outside of wider debates about the nature of consumer society and, indeed, the consumer. Moving us beyond symbolically oriented theories of consumption, the central contributions that practice theory offers to the study of sustainable consumption are to: take seriously materiality (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Shove et al, 2012); elucidate the embeddedness of consumption in the reproduction of everyday life (Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005); challenge an individualised, voluntaristic model of consumption based on the “portfolio model” of the actor (Hindess, 1988, 1989, 1990; Whitford, 2002; Warde and Southerton, 2012); and contribute to our understanding of social change (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012; Shove et al, 2012; SPRG, 2012).

Warde’s 2005 paper “Consumption and Theories of Practice” is widely regarded as the first programmatic application of practice theory to the field of consumption (e.g. Ropke, 2009; Halkier et al, 2011). Warde translates Schatzki’s components of practice into understandings (know-how and

---

8 See Chapter Nine for further elaboration of this issue.

9 Which is not to say that consumption had not previously been analysed in terms of everyday practice partaking in the routine reproduction of social relations (e.g. Miller, 1998; Slater, 1997; Gronow and Warde, 2001).
practical interpretation), procedures (rules, principles, instructions) and engagements (affective and normative orientations) (2005: 134). Thus defined it is clear that each component comprises both the tacit and discursive, and both bodily deportments and mental states.

A central move of Warde’s paper is to stress that “consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice” (2005: 137). Warde defines “consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (ibid.).

This definition demonstrates how theories of practice accommodate two understandings of consumption that are often counter-posed: the expressive or semiotic (e.g. Baudrillard, [1972] 1981) and the utilitarian. While leaving room for the symbolic or communicative properties of commodities it does not afford this aspect of consumption any privilege and indeed can accommodate its critique (e.g. Campbell, 1997; Gronow and Warde, 2001) and counterpoint: consumption attendant to “the accomplishment of routine purposive tasks” (Warde, 2005: 147).

Thus for Warde, whilst there are practices in which people may understand their behaviour as ‘consuming,’ such as shopping (ibid.: 150) these are by far the exception amongst practices in which consumption is a moment. As a caveat to this, Halkier notes that the very problematisation of consumption (in which sustainable consumption plays such a significant part) draws attention to consumption routines qua consumption (2010: 34). Indeed the intention of media discourses and the many purposive interventions of NGOs, public bodies and, increasingly, companies that ascribe societal responsibility to consumers – the province of sustainability communications – is often to foreground everyday practices as consumption practices in order to open them up for revision (ibid; cf Barnett et al, 2011). Clearly, this in no way alters Warde’s contention, but it does draw our attention to the reflexive effects upon practice of a mediatised discourse of sustainable consumption.

Sustainability therefore chiefly relates to the way in which resources are appropriated in the pursuit of practices. For most of modern times, conventionally, processes of appropriating resources from the environment have been ascribed to the sphere of production (Ropke, 2009: 2497). Their ascription to the sphere of consumption in addition is a novelty of contemporary discourse, and much of the normative controversy of discourses of sustainability attends the issue of where on the continuum between production and consumption responsibility for appropriation lies.
The sociology of sustainable consumption itself intervenes in this controversy, chiefly through its problematisation of the figure of the consumer, which practice theory significantly furthers. The figure of the sovereign, autonomous consumer exercising choice is challenged by the view that “most consumption is collectively and normatively derived, and conducted routinely in the context of socially differentiated conventions of practice” (Southerton, et al: 2004: 33). Access to resources (economic, social, cultural), norms of social interaction, as well as infrastructures and material organisation constrain the autonomy of the consumer (ibid). Warde’s account decentres the consumer still further, as “wants are fulfilled only in practice, their satisfaction attributable to effective practical performances” (2005: 142):

“The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture, from personal expression to social competence, from mildly constrained choice to disciplined participation. From this angle the concept of ‘the consumer’... evaporates. Instead the key focal points become the organization of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined.” (ibid.: 146)

Warde’s (2005) analysis focuses attention on the crucial role, for sustainability, played by the recruitment to and defection from practices. Subsequent to Warde’s 2005 paper I would stress three key developments in practice-orientated sociology of sustainable consumption. Firstly, Shove and Pantzar (2005) have made a programmatic point of foregrounding the role of materiality in social practice; Shove et al. (2012) incorporate the material as one of the component elements of practices. Secondly, a concerted effort has been made to critique the model of social action implicit in current policy initiatives (Evans et al, 2012; Shove, 2010; Warde and Southerton, 2012); and the extensive research programme of the Sustainable Practices Research Group offers the constructive, policy-focused alternative. Lastly, practice theory is beginning to be mobilised to theorise the possibility of a sustainability transition at the level of socio-technical regime (McMeekin and Southerton, 2012; Schatzki, 2011; Shove et al., 2012).

The emphasis on the routinised, habitual character of consumption and on “inconspicuous consumption” (Shove and Warde, 1998) in the study of sustainable consumption has tended to draw focus away from the place of cultural intermediaries, the public sphere and media in the wider dynamics of sustainable consumption. The challenge to the model of consumer mobilised in

---

10 Section 4.2.2 revisits this problematic in the context of ethical consumption and Chapter 9 examines models of the consumer implicit in sustainability communications.
sustainability interventions (Shove, 2010; Warde and Southerton, 2012), necessary as it is, perhaps deflects attention away from the workplace as an important site for individuals’ social encounters with sustainable consumption.11

Furthermore, sustained analysis, from a practice theory perspective, of the recursive and reflexive effects of ‘sustainable consumption’ becoming a prominent public discourse has yet to be initiated. It is in these areas that I see the contributions of this thesis to the sociology of sustainable consumption.

2.4 Economy and Society

The social ontology of practice theory does not exhaust the conceptual resources appropriate for analytical engagement with empirical material. I now turn therefore to conceptual resources within cultural sociology, compatible with the social ontology, which are appropriate to the field and offer explanatory potential.

2.4.1 Cultural Intermediaries

As we have seen, practice theory has proved productive for the sociology of sustainable consumption. However, this work has generally addressed the contexts of final use consumption. Equally there is a body of sociological studies that take an empirical, practice-orientated approach to the study of the institutional organisation and professional practices of ‘cultural intermediaries’ in the field of commercial communications (e.g. Cronin, 2004b; Lury, 2004; McFall, 2002; Miller, 1997; Moeran, 1996; Moor, 2007; Nixon, 1996, 1997, 2003; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001; Slater, 2002a and 2002b; Soar, 2002). However, the role of cultural intermediaries in the discourses and practices of corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption has thus far escaped much attention.

McMeekin and Southerton suggest that one approach to establishing better conceptualisations of the “mediation junction” between production and consumption processes in sustainability transitions is to provide a fuller account of the institutional space in which these processes take place and address the ability of intermediaries “in terms of their ability to shape elements within the nexus of practices that occupy [that] space” (2012: 356). This thesis aims to contribute to that task.

11 Halkier (2010) is a recent exception foregrounding the role of media and Hargreaves (2011) in focusing on the workplace.
As cultural intermediaries in the core commercial communication professions are continually involved in articulating the use and exchange values of new products and services, studying these social actors and their professional practices clearly can provide insight into the changing dynamics of contemporary capitalism (Negus 2002: 504). In the case of sustainability communication practitioners, of course, they have a particular relation to this “mediation junction” in that they are engaged in purposive projects which aim to contribute to sustainability transitions, of various orders of scale. The nature of the ‘sustainabilities’ to which they subscribe, their capacity to shape practice elements, and to do so with reference to the understandings of sustainability to which they subscribe are therefore key concerns of the present work.

To adapt McMeekin and Southerton (2007): production and consumption are intermediated by both the attempts of civil society organisations to influence corporate behaviour and governance by claiming to represent ‘the sustainable consumer’, and the strategic efforts of corporations to understand consumer practices and motivations around ‘sustainability’. The field of sustainability communications is at the interface of these two processes.

However, as Cronin (2004a) notes in the context of the literature on advertising professionals as cultural intermediaries, there can be an over-emphasis on mediation simply between producers and consumers. Cronin proposes multiple “regimes of mediation” occurring within the commercial communications field, such as those between advertising agencies and their clients. Sustainability communications practitioners act as mediators of understandings for – and carriers of practices to – their clients, and intermediate understandings between their clients and the communications they produce on their behalf. Moreover those communications may be directed at consumers or employees, citizens or beneficiaries of third sector organisations, other ‘stakeholders’ such as investors, regulators, civil society organisations, other commercial actors (suppliers, competitors) or other mediating organisations, such as CSR ratings agencies or mass media. Recognising these multiple lines of mediation acknowledges a more sociologically adequate account of the complex of relationships between the discourses and practices of corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption than accounts of cultural intermediaries which actually reproduce the distance between production and consumption, rather than exploring the space between these poles (Negus 2002).

Moor summarises three core questions from the cultural intermediaries literature (2008: 409). Firstly, how ‘new’ different types of cultural intermediary occupation really are, both in terms of their quantitative expansion and actual influence. Secondly, consideration of the ongoing debates
about the inclusivity and utility of Bourdieu’s original formulation. Thirdly, to empirically assess the actual influence of such occupations.

I do not take these as my key research questions, which are detailed in the following chapter. However, the issue of novelty posed by the first question is addressed in my accounts of the rise of the field in Chapters 5 and 6. The third question is no mean feat and is to a large degree what this thesis attempts to explore in its entirety. That said it is pursued in rather more modest terms. The position of sustainability communications is such that a key concern, already noted, is the capacity of practitioners to instantiate their own understandings of sustainability. While I argue that the field of sustainability communications plays a performative role, I do not pretend however to be able to give an overall view of that capacity, so much as to chart the attempts of practitioners of sustainability communications to realize it. The second question is somewhat philological, but prompts the need to rehearse Bourdieu’s original formulation.

Bourdieu’s (1984 [1979]) “new cultural intermediaries” included:

“...all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services . . . and in cultural production and organization” (Bourdieu 1984: 359)

For Bourdieu these professions typified a “new petit bourgeoisie,” distinguished from the old petit bourgeois, with its allodoxic “middle brow” culture (ibid: 323), by a blurring and shifting of previously established cultural co-ordinates between high art and popular culture, and between work and leisure. The new petit bourgeoisie is distinguished as a class fraction by incorporating both elements of the upwardly mobile, newly educated working class and a quasi-bohemian middle class element, for which post ‘68 counter-culture provided a key cultural orientation.

Crucially, for Bourdieu, this group forms the “ethical avant garde,” or the Träger, in the Weberian sense, of late modern consumer capitalism (ibid: 356); which it both embodies in its own lifestyle and values and articulates through its role in cultural production (Du Gay, 1997). Not only that, but for Bourdieu the new cultural intermediaries are the enemies of the critical intellectual, who are forced to retreat from public debate, “depriv[ing] ordinary mortals of their knowledge, their competence and their values” (Bourdieu, 2002: 4)

While for Bourdieu (1984: 315) ‘cultural’ journalists and TV producers typified the cultural intermediary, he was at least as concerned with the new therapeutic professions typical of the then burgeoning “service class” such as marriage guidance counsellors, sex therapists and dieticians.
Bourdieu’s use of the term is not therefore unproblematic, losing analytical coherence in its inclusivity, at very least in the British context of class and professional positions (Nixon and Du Gay 2002). That said, Nixon (2003) found the class composition of the UK advertising sector similar to that discussed by Bourdieu. Further, whilst Bourdieu’s employment of the category clearly resonated with shifts in occupational structure in France and beyond, the epithet “new” for commercial communications practitioners, which British sociology has tended to take as the quintessential cultural intermediaries, is clearly problematic (McFall, 2002, see also Frank 1997).

There are however some extraordinary resonances in Bourdieu’s account of the new petit bourgeoisie, when read in the context of the contemporary discourse of sustainability and a recently emerged professional group which generally sees its job in terms of a normative project to instantiate that discourse in society and culture. Bourdieu notes that “one of its distinguishing features is precisely its sense of legitimacy in teaching others the legitimate lifestyle...which creates the need for its own product” (1984: 366). Furthermore, he suggests:

“Seeking its occupational and personal salvation in the imposition of new doctrines of ethical salvation, the new petit bourgeoisie is predisposed to play a vanguard role in struggles over everything concerned with the art of living, in particular, domestic life and consumption.” (ibid.: 367)

Their “ethical proselytism” (ibid.: 370) and “would be scientific morality provides a systematic answer to the problems of daily existence” (ibid.:368). They are those who “started by professing a faith and ended up making it a profession,” who, having moved “from the enthusiastic uncertainties of voluntary evangelism to the security of quasi-civil-servant status” suffer “the ambiguous nature of all those professions...which involve offering (or selling) one’s own art of living as an example to others” (ibid.: 370).

As Nixon and Du Gay suggest, by focusing on cultural intermediaries “it becomes possible to scrutinize the links between economic and cultural practices within the sphere of commercial cultural production; a scrutiny that can bring to light...the interdependence and relations of reciprocal effect between cultural and economic practices” (2002: 498; cf. Nixon, 1996; du Gay, 1997). A particular kind of effect central to my concerns is Bourdieu’s suggestion that cultural intermediaries have the capacity to mobilise economic practices to reproduce their own predilections, mores and practices in the wider culture. Here it is useful to look to cultural economy’s understanding of performativity.
2.4.2 Cultural Economy and Performativity

The broad field of cultural economy (e.g. Amin and Thrift, 2004; du Gay and Pryke, 2002) may be defined as being concerned with the social and cultural processes and relations that make up what has been conventionally designated the economic (Amin and Thrift, 2004: xviii). As such, this thesis, concerned with a novel commercial field, defined by its relation to a widely culturally diffused discourse, can be located within cultural economy.

As noted, commercial communications professions are involved in articulating the use and exchange values (Negus 2002: 504). However, such commercial marketing activities represent only some of the services offered by practitioners of sustainability communications; which include, inter alia, branding of commercial and non-commercial organisations, employee engagement and communication concerning corporate sustainability initiatives. I contend that these activities equally provide insight into the changing dynamics of capitalism, in which the discourse of sustainability plays an increasing part (see especially Chapter 9 and 10).

A definitive move common to many theorists of cultural economy is to analyse the ways in which objects are constituted by the discourses that purport merely to describe them (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002: 5). This is to treat these discourses as performative, in Austin’s (1962) sense of performative utterances that enact that which they describe, such as: “I declare this meeting open”.

Thus Callon argues that economics is a performative discipline that plays a role in the “formatting of markets” (1998a: 46; cf 1998b, 2007). Carrier and Miller argue that economics is part of a performative complex which they call “virtualism” “a practical effort to make the world conform to the structures of the conceptual” (Carrier, 1998:2). Economists, management consultants and auditors have increasingly been able to transform the world into closer approximations of their theories and models through their dominant positions in powerful institutions (Carrier, 1998; Miller, 1997, 1998; 2002a; 2002b; cf. Law, 2002; Miller and Rose, 2008). Similarly Arvidsson (2007), Callon et al (2002), Callon (2010), Cochoy (1998), Lury (2004), Slater (2002a, 2002b, 2002c), Zwick et al (2008) and Zwick and Cayla (2011) argue that branding and marketing are performative practices. Discussing market segmentation as a marketing technique, Tedlow notes:

---

12 For an unpacking of the many and often confused senses in which the economic and the cultural are articulated, see Warde (2002). For how this confusion plays out historically in understandings of marketing see Slater (2011).

13 For Miller’s critique of Callon’s position see Miller (2002).
“Pepsi and other such companies have been more interested in the term segment as a verb than a noun...There was no such thing as the Pepsi generation until Pepsi invented it” (Tedlow, 1990:6 in Frank, 1997:24).

Slater suggests that a defining characteristic of the contemporary economy is not an epochal shift to a semiotic economy as some versions of cultural economy aver (e.g. Lash and Urry, 1994) but an increased attention on the part of the firm to intervention in all the social processes (from design, to consumer practices, to media environments) through which the material and symbolic properties of objects emerge:

“[S]ocial ontology...the processes by which things are materialized as things...has become central to commercial practice. As a result, corporate intervention in these processes has become more reflexive, more rationalized and more institutionalised.” (Slater, 2002c: 107)

Marketing’s role, argues Slater (2002a), is primarily the construction of a market. His case studies of marketing strategy within advertising agencies show that it “is not - in the first instance - a matter of competition within given market structures but over market structures” (2002a: 68). Marketing simultaneously defines both markets and products. While different product definitions delineate different markets, categories of product and market are not simply given, they are contested by advertising and marketing for competitive advantage. These definitions are neither as solidly anchored as conventional economics would have us believe (marketing routinely destabilises them) nor as free floating and malleable as ‘culturalist’ accounts of the semiotic economy claim (markets are routinely institutionalised and the materiality and use-value of objects is realised in social relations of consumption) (Slater, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

Drawing on these insights from cultural economy I approach sustainability communications as a performativa complex of practices, as a key way to conceptualise the processes of cultural intermediation it enacts. That is to suggest that in order to understand its performativity we need to understand it not just through its constituent practices (graphic design, copywriting, etc.) but as a more or less integrated entity in its own right that may, following Bourdieu (1984), allow practitioners to reproduce their own understandings and practices of sustainability through their role in cultural production. This is not to accord sustainability communications an ontological priority above and beyond the practice-order bundles which comprise it, but it is to acknowledge the importance of the, largely discursive, components that circulate through it and integrate it as a practice complex.
A key mode of the performativity of contemporary marketing is the attempted co-optation of consumer practice in mechanisms that can be valorised, through brand equity or otherwise. It is to this consumer co-production of value and its theorisation I now turn.

2.4.3 Governmentality and Consumer Co-production

A certain set of practices concern our relations to and knowledge about ourselves. Foucault calls these “technologies of the self,” that is, techniques which “permit individuals a number of operations on their own bodies, conduct, thoughts so as to transform themselves in order to maintain a certain state” (Foucault, 1988:18). Catholic confession and psycho-analysis are examples, but others include bodily regimes. Another set of practices concern the domination of others – “technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends” (ibid.). Foucault defined governmentality as “contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (1988: 19).¹⁴

Governmentality is therefore a specific modern form of power which is neither the everyday sense of power-as-domination nor the diffuse, productive understanding of power often associated with Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1983; cf Schatzki, 2002: 226-7; Lemke, 2000: 5). Rather it is “the regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means” (Hindess 1996: 106; cf Gordon, 1991).

The concept of governmentality is chiefly relevant to this thesis because it is central to recent analyses of branding or ‘new marketing’ (e.g. Arvidsson, 2007; Zwick et al, 2008; Zwick and Cayla, 2011), and branding plays a central role in sustainability communications (see Chapter Five).

The defining novelty of ‘new marketing’ is to view the consumer as active co-producer of brand value (e.g. Grant, 1999; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Payne et al., 2009). As Zwick et al put it:

“The smartest marketers today bow to the empowered, entrepreneurial, and free consumer...adherents to the logic of co-creation focus on the provision of ambiances that set consumers free to produce and share technical, social, and cultural knowledge.” (Zwick, et al., 2008: 184)

¹⁴ An earlier definition (from 1978) lacks any connection to technologies of the self (Foucault, 1991: 102-103).
Brands present themselves to consumers as cultural resources (Holt, 2002, 2006a). Co-creation is theorised by these approaches as seeking to employ technologies of the self to shape dispositions and actions in order to intensify economic processes. Thus Arvidsson characterises brand management as “a vanguard form of capitalist governance” (2007: 137), synonymous with governmentality. Branding, for Arvidsson, “is about making the becoming of subjects and the becoming of value coincide,” furthermore “this process proceeds through the agency of subjects” (2007:93).

Arvidsson’s account is of brands as capitalist institutions rather than simply as cultural phenomenon: “the institutional embodiment of a new form of informational capital - much like the factory embodied industrial capital” (2007: vii). For Zwick et al: “the challenge of new marketing ‘governmentality’ is to ensure that consumer freedom evolves in the ‘right’ way” (2008: 184) - i.e. in a way that can be valorised by capital. Brand management aims “to posit consumption as an economically productive activity, as a form of labour” (2006: 72).

A key contribution of these accounts is to provide an analysis of the consumer “re-envisioned as a productive subject in contemporary brand management” (Brewer and Trentmann 2006: 12) and to trace the logic of brand management as a form of economic governance (2006:74). But Arvidsson makes a much wider argument: “Brands are...an example of capital socialized to the extent of transpiring the minute relations of everyday life, to the point of becoming a context of life, in effect” (2007: 13). For this to be true, of course, brands themselves have to transpire “the minute relations of everyday life”. Similarly, for Lury brands “are constitutive of social relations [in] the everyday world” (2004:150).

The significance of branding for organisations of all types, and of the brand as a capitalist institution, is empirically demonstrable (see Section 4.4.2). However, we may ask whether the presence of brands in lived experience, beyond that of certain subcultural groups and exceptional examples, achieves the ‘thickness’ to justify anything other than a marginal relevance as symbolic resources for the construction of identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) or as constitutive of “the mundane context of action within which we become subjects” (Arvidsson, 2007: 5).

To accept otherwise is to conflate the strong claims of brand management with an account of social reality. Brand management certainly does partake of Miller’s “virtualism” (1998), but we should be cautious of eliding critical accounts with its account of its own ambitions. If for brand practitioners professional jurisdiction and brand equity lie behind the desire to transform the world into a closer
approximation of their model, for the theorists of marketing governmentality the motivation to exaggerate consumer co-production lies in the quest for a paradigmatic example of the appropriation of social practice by capital. Space does not allow further examination of this important issue.

However, it points to a general problem with the deployment of governmentality, especially by those who theorise it as the novel form of governance of neoliberalism (e.g. Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2000; Miller and Rose, 2008); that of confusing the ambitions of programmes of governance with their successful instantiation in processes of subjectification.\(^\text{15}\) There remains the empirical question of the extent, in any specific location, to which people submit themselves to the techniques of governmentality. I therefore deploy governmentality with the caveat that it primarily describes the attempts of practitioners to instantiate their own projects in the social world, rather than assume the success of those projects.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Schatzki’s social ontology, supplemented by other resources within practice theory, provides the general theoretical framework for the thesis. Practice theory has been productively mobilised in the study of end-use consumption, and contributes an important theoretical orientation to the study of sustainable consumption. This thesis seeks to apply that orientation to a neglected site within the wider field of sustainable consumption—that of the cultural production of sustainability communications. Additional, ontologically compatible, resources have been drawn from the broad field of cultural economy. Core themes of cultural economy are the role of cultural intermediaries and the performativity of commercial communications. I therefore seek to examine the cultural intermediation of sustainability through a performative idiom, and additionally draw upon the concept of governmentality, which, while it has wider application, has been specifically deployed to critique consumer co-production as a contemporary form of performative enactment.

Chapter 3: Researching Sustainability Communications

3.1 Research Questions

The thesis draws upon theories of practice to explore processes of cultural intermediation, specifically relating to issues of sustainability, within the commercial field of sustainability communications, as a contribution to the sociology of sustainable consumption and the field of cultural economy. To address this focus I adapt a set of historical, institutional and theoretical questions proposed by Warde (2005) for a practice orientated research programme addressing final consumption. As the institutional questions immediately suggest the appropriateness of participant observation as a method, this initial set of questions is complemented by the questions underlying what Marcus (1998) calls the “multi-sited ethnographic research imaginary”. The following questions have guided the research process and framed the writing of the thesis:

**Historical** – What historical accounts are necessary to explain the discourses and understandings employed in the practice of commercial sustainability communications? What accounts are necessary to explain why the practices are performed as they are?

**Institutional** - How are the practices performed? What are the conflicts and constraints involved in the performance of commercial sustainability communications? Which discourses and understandings are employed, and which discourses and understandings are excluded? How are notions of the consumer, brand and sustainable consumption articulated through these practices?

**Ethnographic** - How is the micro perspective of ethnographic research articulated with the macro perspective of larger systems? What is the relation of this specific social world to historical change?

**Theoretical** - How does the project help elaborate the use of practice theory for the sociology of sustainable consumption? What is the heuristic value of practice theory for the sociology of sustainable consumption beyond the study of final consumption? How does this study inform our wider understanding of sustainable consumption?

Warde suggests that a thorough analysis will “ask how practices develop, considering both their internal dynamics and the external conditions of their existence” as well as how different practices affect one another, or how “understandings, knowledge and orientations transmigrate across boundaries” (2005: 149). My focus therefore demands developing an understanding of the
formation, reproduction and development of the commercial field and its wider relations to issues of sustainable consumption and corporate sustainability.

The commercial field sits within a wider field of sustainability communications, which includes public and NGO communications. It consists of a market composed of independent communications agencies and dedicated units in international commercial communications groups, as well as in-house corporate teams. My focus within the commercial field is on the agency market (see Fig. 1 below). Firstly, I suggest it is here, that the relative autonomy of agencies affords the most salient approach to issues of the cultural intermediation of sustainability. Secondly, in-house corporate teams are often an adjunct to the CSR function of firms, which has been widely studied, whereas dedicated sustainability communications agencies are a novel area of research. Lastly, the rapid growth of the agency market and entrance of the major communication groups into it demonstrates its dynamic role within the wider field.

Fig. 1 The Sustainability Communications Field

The wider concerns of my research rest on the contention that the commercial sustainability communications field can act as a lens to examine certain general features of corporate
sustainability discourse and practice. Communications play a central role in projects of corporate sustainability: internally and externally focused sustainability initiatives are fundamentally communication dependent; sustainability reporting has become a key ordering technique within corporate sustainability programmes; and the communicative practice of brand management has become a key mode through which corporations seek to derive value, internally and externally, from sustainability initiatives. I therefore seek to illuminate some wider features of corporate sustainability, specifically: what I call corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption; and how sustainability and brand are articulated together.

The research questions established, I would like to further delimit the focus of enquiry. The novelty of the field is such that it is particularly open to contestation between professional groups, such as communication practitioners and CSR professionals, deploying competing expert knowledge as “cultural machinery of jurisdiction” (Abbott 1988: 59). As such, issues concerning the dynamics of professionalization are opened up. However, these issues are not fore-grounded and addressed only in as much as they illuminate and frame issues of the cultural intermediation of sustainability. It is not that I regard issues of professionalization as unimportant to the field of sustainability communications, it is simply that, as the central object of my concern is the mediation of notions and practices of sustainability, those issues are subordinate in my project; relevant only in as much as they illuminate the central topic.

3.2 Research Methods

In order to properly address the research questions above, a range of methods is demanded. Shove et al (2012) make the useful distinction between practices viewed as entities and practices viewed as performance (see Section 2.2.1). The historical questions address the practice complex of sustainability communications as entity, and the conditions of possibility for its contemporary performance. The institutional questions primarily address the performance of sustainability communications. The ethnographic questions address how sustainability communications as both performance and entity interacts with wider social orders. The theoretical questions, it goes without saying, also address both perspectives. These two perspectives demand different methodological considerations (SPRG, 2012: 3).

The historical questions suggest reviewing academic and practitioner literature, which addresses the key contexts within which sustainability communications has arisen as a field. Clearly secondary documentary sources can also inform the ethnographic questions. As the emergence of the field is recent – largely over the last 15 years or so – and it lacks any definitive published account, first-hand
accounts are both possible and necessary; thus suggesting interviews with key informants. Lastly, while carriers of practices may be able to disclose their understandings of those practices, participant observation clearly affords a deep insight into the everyday performance and organisational dynamics of practices.

In the rest of this chapter I address the methods of ethnography and other observation, interviews, documentary research and the use of online resources.\textsuperscript{16}

\subsection*{3.2.1 A Note on Ethics}

Approval was obtained from the University ethics committee for the research. As the research subjects were not in vulnerable positions and the research topic unproblematic ethical approval was uncomplicated. Research subjects were presented with a brief project summary and information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. Anonymity was guaranteed and all references to informants in the thesis are anonymised unless specifically requested otherwise or of public record. Anonymity was important in allowing informants to speak freely about, for example, their views of companies they worked for and with. In the participant observation project it was made clear to all employees of the fieldwork company that anyone could decline consent without undermining the project as whole – my working for the company, from the point of view of employees, was a fait accompli presented to them by their CEO. None declined to participate, nor declined to be interviewed.

One ethical consideration with the participant observation project was that I was agreeing to work unpaid at a time of great economic uncertainty for the company. Beyond the fact of the recession, much of the company’s client base was public or third sector, at a time when the Coalition government was cutting funding to many organisations, and had made a specific point about cutting back on perceived ‘profligate’ spending on communications. Indeed, at one point the company was actually identified by a Conservative MP in his blog as an example of frivolous public sector spending, in relation to work conducted for the city council. The possibility of redundancies at the company was very real at this time and therefore my unpaid work could be seen to compromise the

\textsuperscript{16} The thesis obliquely engages with what Savage and Burrows (2007) call the “politics of method”. The field of sustainability communications partakes in practices that have been described as “commercial sociology” (see Chapter Seven, cf.: Burrows and Gane, 2006; Savage and Burrows, 2007; Pridmore and Lyon, 2011). As Callon notes, “the similarities of the techniques used in marketing and in sociology cannot be over-emphasised” (2002: 211). Not only does the field engage in a dialectic of academic and commercial knowledge (Lury and Warde, 1997), as a form of commercial sociology it lays claim to legitimacy to deploy its expert knowledge in purposive projects that intervene in and engage with the social milieu of sustainable consumption. Sociology is at once a partner and competitor in this field of interventions.
position of colleagues. I was conscious to therefore monitor this, and the possibility that the situation cause ill-will. In the event the exemplary pastoral concern of the company’s managers meant that the situation did not arise.

3.2.2 A Note on Presentation

Quotations that are indented mark quotations presented as data. Quotations from academic sources are therefore not indented whatever their length. Quotations from informants are presented verbatim, except where the imprecision of spoken language impairs communication and some tidying has been permitted. Key informants are identified by a code in the form (KI 1) which relates them to their career sketches in Appendix I.

3.2.1 Ethnography, Participant Observation and Fieldwork

The institutional questions posed above suggest the utility of a participant observation approach to the field, and this accepted, it further suggests the ethnographic questions cited above. The rich, contextualized understandings of ethnography, its attention to the messy complexity of everyday practices and the articulation of micro and macro contexts, provides fertile ground for the study of consumption, consumer culture and cultural intermediation.

The terms ethnography and participant observation are often used interchangeably. In order to delimit the ambitions of the participant observation fieldwork within the research project it is therefore useful to first unpack these terms and their relations.

Ethnography is the description, interpretation and analysis of a culture or social group, or of particular social practices, processes or problems, through field research in naturally occurring settings. Sociological ethnography, in contrast to its anthropological cousin, usually involves bounded periods of fieldwork in the researcher’s own society rather than long term, comprehensive social immersion in an alien culture, and addresses relatively discrete cultural forms (Amit, 2000).

Participant observation comprises a core activity in ethnographic fieldwork and is generally considered its central method. However within ethnography it is commonly supplemented with other methods such as interviewing, textual analysis and the interpretation of visual representations and material artifacts. Indeed where the research concerns knowledge practices, methodologically this implies the analysis of written sources and visual artefacts in as much as the subjects of the study refer to them as relevant sources of knowledge (Lien, 1997: 22).
However, the practice of ethnography cannot be reduced to particular research methods, or even a single methodological position. Different theoretical frameworks compete over what ethnography is and how it should be practiced, due to their commitment to different ontological and epistemological positions (Brewer, 2000). While there is far from consensus, Atkinson et al provide a useful definition of the “ethnographic imagination” as implying a commitment to: the interpretation of social action; an understanding of social organization; an analysis of the realisation of macro-level processes in local social contexts; and a recognition of the complexity and multiplicity of cultural meanings in observed social action (Atkinson et al, 2003: 113-115).

In sociology, the major early current of ethnography was found in the ‘Chicago School’ of ethnography. Between around 1917-1942 numerous ethnographies were produced, chiefly by students of Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, that portrayed the diverse “social worlds” of, mainly urban, everyday life and the symbolic interactions of specific communities and groups, often the marginalized and “deviant” (see Deegan, 2001: 11-25). The ‘Chicago style’ of fieldwork was to have lasting influence. The inheritors of the tradition in the 1950s and ‘60s, such as Becker, Strauss, Greer and Schatzman addressed the tendency to a lack of methodological reflection amongst the early ethnographers by producing major methodological works (Deegan, 2001).

Classical ethnography assumed a largely unproblematic stance to issues of representation and methodology. The ‘reflexive turn’ that began in anthropology from the mid 1980s, conventionally announced by Clifford and Marcus’ (eds.) hugely influential 1986 collection Writing Culture, confronted ethnography with post-structuralist, post-colonialist and feminist critiques. The reflexive turn saw a rejection of natural science as an appropriate model for ethnographic enquiry, a questioning of the legitimacy of ethnography’s claims to a privileged perspective and of the realist assumption that the language of ethnographic writing was a transparent medium.

The ‘reflexive turn’ foregrounded the power relations implicit in ethnographic research and writing and a sensitivity on the part of the ethnographer to her own social, cultural and historical location and to the ethical and political context in which the production of ethnographic knowledge takes place. The experimentalism of the ‘reflexive turn’ led to divergent views of ethnography, on the one hand conceived as a dialogue between ethnographer and subject aimed at mutual understanding, or cultural interpretation, on the other ethnography conceived as political and cultural critique.17

17 Against conventional, realist ethnography Marcus (1998) has characterised the new ethnography of the reflexive turn, such as Taussig’s Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man (1987), as drawing on the experimentation of a modernist aesthetic sensibility. Others sympathetic to the interdisciplinary critiques of
Thus for Burawoy, the ethnographic dialogue is also one between theory and data, with the aim of revealing how macro principles, such as commodification, shape and are shaped by everyday worlds of social interaction (Burawoy, 1991: 5-6). Contemporary ethnographers are presented with the problem of articulating the micro perspective of the social worlds of ethnographic fieldwork with the macro perspective of larger systems or phenomena and showing their interconnections over time. Marcus characterises the adequate response to this problematic as the “multi-sited ethnographic research imaginary” which calls for the “tracing and describing of connections and relationships among sites” (Marcus, 1998: 14). While this may be embraced through literally studying multiple locales, Marcus (1998) suggests a legitimate technique is also to attend to how macro processes are articulated in the local ethnographic context.

To delimit the ambitions of the participant observation, then, the study does not claim to give a full anthropological account of the lives of research subjects or their social world but rather concentrates on certain cultural processes and the research subjects as practitioners of certain practices. While I would like to claim that the participant observation element of my research project does have a faithfulness to the “ethnographic imagination” (Atkinson et al., 2003) it does not have the ambition to provide a full account of a social world or a full account of the social positioning of the research subjects.

3.2.1.1 Fieldwork: Participant Observation in a Sustainability Communications Agency

Over 10 months, from July 2010 to May 2011, I conducted participant observation with a dedicated sustainability communications agency, working for usually two or three days a week in the agency’s offices, for a total of around 100 days. In Chapter Seven I provide a portrait of the agency. In the reflexive turn (such as Atkinson et al 2003) have cautioned innovators not to forget the rich resources of ethnographic history. Bourdieu (2003: 281) has criticised the reflexive turn in ethnography as narcissistic and an abandonment of ethnography’s commitment to scientific objectivity. For Bourdieu (2003) ‘reflexivity’ means a rigorous commitment to explicating the objective social and cultural position of the ethnographer, rather than a focus on the ethnographer’s subjective experience of fieldwork or experiments with ethnographic writing.

A word of caution is needed here on the use of “micro” and “macro”. Schatzki’s “flat ontology” (2011) suggests that what are called macro phenomena can only themselves be analysed through the field of practices – they do not possess sui generis existence ontologically distinct from the local or micro context (Schatzki, 2001:5) (see Section 2.2).
addition to participant observation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners in
the agency both to explore issues arising from practice and explore the personal histories,
dispositions and understandings of the practitioners unavailable through observation alone.
Spradley (1979) suggests that the key role of ethnographic interviewing is to produce narratives
about socially embedded experiences.

I had previously worked as a copywriter and journalist, with a degree of specialism in business
sustainability issues and ethical consumption. I was therefore able to offer to participate as a
member of the team, as a copywriter and researcher, in exchange for my observations.

The participant observation enabled an account of how sustainability communications are
performed, what conflicts and constraints practitioners are subject to and what the practitioners
understand by what they are doing. The fieldwork enabled the charting of practitioners’ attempts to
performatively articulate understandings of sustainability, whilst being subject to, and negotiating
with, wider social and economic processes. In Chapter Eight I provide an account of a project that I
worked on during my fieldwork at the agency. Additionally, in occupying particular positions within
the social field of sustainability communications the case study of the agency helps to illuminate
certain features of that field.

Furthermore it enables the products of sustainability communications to be analysed as
communicative artefacts which are the result of negotiated and conflictual interactions between
different groups of expert knowledge workers and professionals with different understandings,
agendas and discourses of sustainability - not merely to address finished products as vehicles for
discursive positions.

In seeking to address the ethnographic research questions I move beyond the local fieldwork context
of cultural production, drawing on documentary sources and key informant interviews to trace
extensive, empirical connections between the site of cultural production and larger social milieu and
wider phenomena. Specifically, I address instantiations of the sustainable consumer (Chapter Nine),
the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption (Section 10.2), the “cultural circuit of
capitalism” (Thrift, 2005) or “cultural politics of work” (Fleming, 2009) within the corporation
(Section 10.3), and the public sphere (Section 10.4).
3.2.2 Key Informant Interviews

The second key empirical method employed was interviews with key informants selected from across the wider field of sustainability communications. While my focus is on commercial communications, and the agency market within that, the wider field of sustainability communications encompasses NGOs, campaign groups, government agencies and other public bodies – both as clients of commercial sustainability communications companies and producers of communications themselves.

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen key informants (two were interviewed twice). Interviews were between 46 and 134 minutes in length, with an average of 84 minutes. Interviews were recorded, as well as notes being taken concurrently. Subsequently a written summary and partial transcription was made. Most interviews were the sole points of contact between researcher and respondent (outside of the recruitment process); some were part of ongoing exchanges, via email, telephone and face-to-face (in the case of one ongoing exchange dialogues were recorded). One informant was interviewed as both a pilot and subsequent late stage interview; and one interview doubled as a journalistic exercise (Welch, 2010).

Of sixteen key informants interviewed, two had had very senior corporate positions, several senior NGO positions and most senior communication agency or consultancy positions. One had senior experience within the public sector and one currently held an academic post in a marketing department. Several of the interviewees had, over the course of their careers, moved to different positions in the field; from NGO communications to commercial communications, from the agency sphere to corporate sphere, and so on. This range of first-hand experience greatly contributed to developing a synthetic account of the field.

The key informants group was notably demographically homogenous. Almost all were aged between late 30s and late 40s, a function of the degree of professional seniority sought and the novelty of the field. All were white and all but one of the group were men. While I was disappointed that I was unable to obtain interviews with other prominent women in the field (interviews were sought with four further female practitioners) the key informant group was not intended to be fully representative, so much as authoritative.¹⁹ In Appendix One short profiles of the key informants are

¹⁹ The commercial communications professions are notoriously male dominated at the senior level (for an account of gender in the UK advertising industry see Nixon 2002). However, the senior levels of sustainability
provided both to demonstrate their salience to the research and provide sociological insight into the professional histories of some senior practitioners within the field.

The key informant interviews helped contextualise the participant observation fieldwork in the wider field – for example to flag up where generalisation from the case study might be admissible and where not. They provided insight into different actor positions in the field as well as first-hand accounts of the history and wider dynamics of the field. While a diversity of interview subjects does not provide a depth of focus on a specific functional role or actor group it has the advantage of illuminating shared discourses and understandings in the field as a whole.

Interviews informed both, on the one hand, the *historical* perspective and, on the other hand, the *ethnographic* and *institutional* perspectives in which the research was framed. First-hand accounts of the history of the field were an invaluable complement, and an occasional challenge to, the genealogical readings (Chapter Four). Secondly, the key informant interviews spoke to the *institutional* and *ethnographic* questions by providing a wider perspective of the field than that afforded by the participant observation alone.

Interviews were intended to explore the understandings of practitioners of the practices they are engaged in, and of the discourses that frame and interweave those practices. The routine, tacit and un-reflexive nature of many social practices may suggest interviewing as a problematic research method. It is less problematic however when addressing integrative practices that are highly technical in nature, such as the knowledge practices of sustainability communications. Furthermore, when seeking to address the “normative reasoning woven into practices” (Barnett et al, 2011: 115) it is an essential complement to observation alone.

communications are probably less so given the gender ratio among senior sustainability professionals appears to be far more equal. Senior sustainability communications professionals are obviously a subset of both groups and whether the gender ratio amongst them is more akin to that of one group or the other is speculative. Aggregating the figures for the most senior band of advertising and marketing professionals from ONS 2011 (Second Quarter) Labour Force Survey statistics gives a male to female ratio of 80.6:19.4, out of an overall workforce ratio of 54:46 (CFA, 2012:12). A 2010 survey of sustainability professionals, on the other hand, reports that the gender ratio of those at the most senior level (matching my sample, with 15-20 years employment experience) was: in-house, male to female 47:53; consultants, male to female 51:49 (n=595) (Acre et al, 2010:21). The overall UK sustainability professional workforce ratio is male to female 39:61 (UK) (ibid). These figures were not disaggregated in such a way as to specify figures for sustainability communications practitioners as a group, although it is clear from the report that they make up a reasonable proportion of the survey group.
That said, I do not mean to imply that the key informant interviews were epistemologically transparent. All methods partake in the conditions of possibility for the production of knowledge (Denzin, 2001; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Fontana and Frey, 2000; Koro-Ljungberg and Greckhamer, 2005; Lather, 2007). Furthermore, not only are respondents “constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997:141) my informants were reflexively constructive of the knowledge that they purported to simply ‘communicate about’; such as, for example, the nature of consumers.

Savage and Burrows note the peculiar emphasis in British sociology on the method of the qualitative interview and locate its origins in the critique of Parsonian functionalism, as a means to “understanding respondents’ own conceptions of the social order” (2007: 893). They go on to note that when removed from the context of that original critique the value of the interview as a method requires justification (2007: 894). In response, I would justify the method by stressing that the ambition of the key informant interviews was strictly limited – to elicit information towards a synthetic account of the field, normative reasoning and understanding of certain key issues. I would not characterise them as ethnographic interviews, as they were dis-embedded from, and did not seek to fully explicate, the social worlds of the informants (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1997; Hely, 2007). Thus while I did seek to partially explore their “own conceptions of the social order” I did not seek to elicit the full Weltanschaung of informants. In which context, I note Savage and Burrows’ concession that the interview “remains a useful device for allowing respondents to reflect on their practices, histories and identities by suspending such practices in order to allow people to ‘account for themselves’” (op cit.).

Interviewing as a method further raises the “the location question,” as Mason calls it (Mason 2002: 226) - the relative social location of interviewer and interviewee. As Valentine notes when interviewing elites or business people the usual concerns over the authority position of the academic interviewer may be reversed; it is often the informants who “have the upper hand” (1997: 114). Furthermore, in the case of commercial communication practitioners an interview with an academic researcher is in danger of being framed by the informant by the popular and political critiques of marketing and advertising—thus potentially distorting the informant’s account (Lury, 1994). This possibility is surely heightened in the context of the fraught social and political debates over consumerism and sustainability. A strong guarantee of anonymity may go some way to ameliorate this issue. Perhaps more important in the case of my research, however, was that I was able to locate myself not only as an academic researcher but as a sometime practitioner in the field myself,
through both my fieldwork and previous professional experience. While the overall tone of my respondents ranged from the somewhat promotional to the utterly cynical I was impressed by the candour of all.

3.2.2.1 The Interview Process

Kvale notes that the planning process is decisive for the quality of the later analytical use of interview material and the accounts it may provide (Kvale 1996: 144). Three pilot interviews were therefore conducted early in the research process, one of which was used as the subject of a methods training exercise. Each of the pilot interviewees were located in different areas of the field (NGO, agency, corporate), and each had, from their different positions, around a 20 year involvement in it. The body of interviews was subsequently conducted when research questions had been finalised.

Before each interview research was conducted into the respondents’ professional background and networks (using LinkedIn profiles as a starting point, see below). Companies and organisations that the respondents had previously worked for were researched, as well as any material that could be located produced by or about the respondent (blogs, interviews, books, professional projects etc). This material was used to develop questions specific to the interviewee’s professional history and location in the field. Each interview began by eliciting a narrative concerning the respondent’s career (e.g. “how do you get from being a marine biologist to founding a sustainability communications agency?”). Questions common to several interviews were also asked (e.g. “Do you see corporate sustainability initiatives as primarily responding to consumer demand?”).

The key topics addressed were: the history of the field; informants’ careers and experiences of organisations within the field; informants’ dispositions and motivations towards the field; their understandings of sustainability communications, corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption; and of key concepts, such as consumers and brands.

Whilst I tried to be non-directive in eliciting understandings, in late stage interviews I was also concerned to test out whether ideas I had about the field reflected practitioners own understandings of the field. I also wanted to know whether views expressed by earlier interviewees were more widely shared. Thus in these interviews some questions took highly directed form, such as:
“Some people I’ve spoken to view the field as very much divided between values-driven agencies and those that see sustainability purely as an economic opportunity. Is that a characterisation you’d recognise?”

The interviews were a mix of face-to-face and phone interviews. While it is acknowledged that face-to-face interactions usually produce higher quality interviews, the respondents were mainly senior communication professionals, and were generally both very articulate and often experienced in giving interviews pertaining to their professional expertise (several had experience of providing media interviews). Telephone interviews, where expedient, were therefore deemed less problematic than might be the case in other projects. It is interesting to note here the contemporary ubiquity of the interview form. As Gubrium and Holstein (2003) suggest we live in an “interview society” saturated by the form in both popular media and professional practice. Indeed, conducting interviews was a common part of my professional practice during fieldwork within the communications agency.

The most important attribute I sought from my respondent group as a whole was a range of positions from across the field of sustainability communications; on an individual basis I sought seniority of professional experience. This was achieved and indeed several respondents could be considered leading figures in the field.

In order to achieve this mix within the respondent group targeted recruitment was key. Three informants were existing contacts, two were encountered during the research period as part of my own professional practice and two recruited through personal recommendation. Despite then having some existing contacts in the field the most useful recruitment tool proved to be the professional social networking website LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), through which the remaining eight were recruited.

3.2.3 Documentary Sources and Practitioner Literature

Documentary material and practitioner literature, as well as observation and participation in online forums, provided a broad context of source material. After studying academic literature, this monitoring, collating and analysis of practitioner material probably represented the greatest commitment of research time of the methods discussed here. The key types of documentary material reviewed were: sustainability related websites; grey literature published online; corporate sustainability reports; online forums; and published practitioner literature.
This body of material includes therefore both the products of sustainability communications and practitioner material about the field. In discussing these kinds of documentary materials at some length I begin to introduce the field of sustainability communications in more detail.

3.2.3.1 Monitoring and Collating Online Sources

Throughout my research I reviewed specialist business sustainability news websites\(^{20}\), and websites of communication agencies, NGOs, think tanks and research houses, all of which are routinely updated with blogs, news items, white papers, case studies and so on. Another key form of online material is that produced by firms to promote, demonstrate and elicit engagement with their corporate sustainability initiatives. This is distinct from firms’ formal corporate social responsibility or sustainability reporting, discussed below. The key audiences for this material may be employees, consumers or both. It is here that the discourse of corporate sustainability increasingly meets up with that of sustainable consumption – in what I call corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption (see Section 10.2).

Monitoring such secondary sources obviously serves multiple functions: developing a ‘feel’ for the field and the relations between particular organisations and individuals; keeping up to date with trends, developments, and events; and identifying content for further synthesis and analysis. I do not claim to have systematically analysed this huge body of material. However, this online media monitoring afforded the collation of hundreds of pertinent articles, online discussions and reports which fed into an understanding of the field and provided exemplary material for the explorations of key themes.

From May 2011 to May 2012 I systematically collated email newsletters, having established a core set of newsletters that were representative of the wider field and with sufficient focus on communications to be useful for my purposes. The purpose of this exercise was to provide a content resource that could easily be searched for key terms (such as consumer, brand, employee engagement and so on). This archive could then be used as a resource to empirically inform claims to generalisability regarding discourses of sustainability communications and corporate sustainability.

\(^{20}\) Most commonly viewed specialist sustainability and CSR business new sites were as follows (most have dedicated marketing and communications sections): CSR International (www.csrinternational.org); CSR Newswire (www.csrwire.com); Business Green (www.businessgreen.com); Ethical Corporation (www.ethicalcorp.com); Greenbiz.com; Guardian Sustainable Business (www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business); Triple Pundit: CSR and Sustainable Business News (www.triplepundit.com).
Over this period of 12 months 573 newsletters were collected. Of these 254 were selected for the archive on the basis of pertinence to key concerns.21

3.2.3.2 Sustainability Reports

CSR reports, or sustainability reports as they are increasingly known, form a vast body of material available online, usually in the form of PDFs as well as increasingly web pages and embedded video (primarily interviews). As an indication of the scale of this body of material and its exponential growth, in December 2009 CorporateRegister.com, the world’s largest online directory of sustainability reports listed in its archive 23,941 reports produced by 5,915 companies; at the time of writing (July 2012) the archive had increased to 41,238 reports across 9,153 companies, almost double in less than two years (CorporateRegister, 2009, 2012).

A systematic analysis of sustainability reports is outside the remit of this thesis. However, an understanding of these texts as core products of sustainability communications was nevertheless essential. CorporateRegister.com’s ReportAlert service, which provides email alerts of the publication of reports by participating firms, allowed me to keep abreast of developments in the field and sample a range of report material. Between 2009 and 2010 I received individual alerts to specific reports (around 15 a month), which provided short summaries of key features of the reports and throughout 2011 I received monthly alerts listing links to an average of 17 reports.

3.2.3.3 Practitioner Literature

While researching Chapter Four I engaged with the wide fields of practitioner literature on both brand management and marketing and on CSR and corporate sustainability. Here I address practitioner literature relating specifically to sustainability communications.22

21 The newsletters collated in the archive were: 2degrees (www.2degreesnetwork.com); CSR International (www.csrinternational.org); CSR News (www.csr-news.net); The Smarter Business Blog (www.tobywebb.blogspot.com); Ethical Corporation (www.ethicalcorp.com); Guardian Sustainable Business (www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business); Saatchi & Saatchi S (www.saatchis.com); Tesco Knowledge Hub (produced by 2degrees, subscription by invitation); Corporate Register (www.CorporateRegister.com).

22 I use the term in a generic sense, to include practitioner literature relating to CSR communications, ‘green marketing’ and ‘ethical marketing’. Although it does have increasing generic use by no means all practitioners or practitioner literature accepts the label ‘sustainability communications’.
The practitioner literature can be divided between literature commercially published by and for communications and sustainability practitioners and ‘grey literature’ – namely reports, white papers, case studies and so forth, produced by communications agencies, NGOs, think tanks and research houses. This latter body of literature is divided between documents (and increasingly video and audio files) freely available online and proprietary documents produced by commercial research agencies as commercial products, and usually only available at considerable cost (and therefore generally inaccessible to the researcher). 

A major body of sustainability communications practitioner literature concerns the practices attendant to reporting, and discussion, analysis and critique of the trends in reporting, as well as of individual reports. A similarly large body of work from CSR professionals concerns the practices attendant to the production of the data from which reports are produced, reporting standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative (www.globalreporting.org) and the relation between sustainability reporting and actual, material sustainability impacts of firms.

While for some research-focused firms the selling of proprietary research literature is a key part of their business model, for other sustainability communication agencies free reports, white papers, case-studies and ‘thought pieces’ are used to promote the agency and market its expertise. Indeed, achieving timely ‘first mover’ publication on a key topic can ensure that the agency’s work becomes almost a standard text, often cited and linked to from numerous other websites. This has the effect of driving web traffic to the agency’s website and thus increasing their authority status for internet search engines, in turn driving the agency’s website and publication to the top of search engine listings.

---

23 For example, a 52 page PDF available Ethical Corporation (www.ethicalcorp.com) on “Communications, Campaigns and Social Media” costs £495 (http://reports.ethicalcorp.com/reports/smcc/ viewed 04/07/12).

24 While the number of sources of this material is too numerous to list, Ethical Corporation (www.ethicalcorp.com) was an invaluable source here, and in the agency world Radley Yeldar (www.ry.com) consistently produces high quality material relating to CSR reporting. Additionally an important resource is CorporateRegister.com.

25 Again CorporateRegister.com was invaluable here. Its ‘Expert Reviews’ of individual CSR Reports have been published weekly-to-fortnightly from January 2009 (see www.corporateregister.com/reviews).

26 Probably the best example in the UK sustainability communications field is Futerra’s Greenwash Guide, produced in 2008. It covers the issue of misleading environmental claims in advertising and marketing, surveys the advertising industry’s attitude towards the issue, the common features of ‘greenwash’, advertising...
Turning to book publishing, there is a burgeoning popular genre of “sustainable business” books, moving beyond the traditional concerns of CSR, which often address issues of sustainability communications. A much smaller group of contemporary practitioner literature addressing sustainability communications follows on from a slew of “green marketing” books which began to be published in the 1990s (e.g. Coddington, 1993; Mintu-Wimsatt and Lozada (eds.), 1996; Polonsky and Mintu-Wimsatt, 1997; Charter and Polonsky, 1999; Wasik, 1996). Capitalising on the green consumer boom of the early ‘90s, these works largely faded into obscurity, with the exception of Jacquelyn A. Ottman’s Green Marketing (1998). Post millennium, a number of publications by and for marketing practitioners have been positioned as “sustainability marketing” (e.g. Belz and Peattie, 2009; Emery, 2011; Grant, 2012; Savitz, 2006). Three of my key informants have published recent influential practitioner texts: John Grant’s The Green Marketing Manifesto (2007); Chris Arnold’s Ethical Marketing and the New Consumer (2009); and Guy Champniss’ (with Vila) Brand Valued (2011).

3.2.4 Events and Online Forums

Conferences, workshops and other organised events are a significant feature of contemporary corporate sustainability life, and to a lesser extent that of communication agencies. Both the worlds of corporate sustainability, and of brand and marketing are filled with programmes of conference events where executives show case their own work, network and promote their services. Indeed the two are increasingly coming together, at events such as the annual Sustainable Brands conference based in San Francisco. Founded in 2006, Sustainable Brands is billed as “a global learning, collaboration, and commerce community of forward-thinking sustainability, business and brand strategy” (Sustainable Brands, 2012). In 2012 the franchise was extended to a UK event, SB London.

regulations relating to environmental claims and so on. The report was published at a time of high levels of media interest in the issue, and since its publication in 2008 has kept Futerra on the first page of Google searches for “greenwash”. Similarly, corporate communications agency Radley Yeldar (www.ry.com), which has a dedicated sustainability communications team produces a steady output of free whitepapers and research reports as a core element of its promotional strategy.

27 See also the 1998 special issue of the Journal of Marketing Management on green marketing (Vol. 14, No. 6); Kilbourne and Beckman (1998) provide a review of environmentally oriented marketing research up to that point.

28 Ottman more recently published the successful The New Rules of Green Marketing, 2010; see also Ottman 2004.
However, the high price of commercial conferences meant they were largely impractical as research sites. It is worth pointing out that the price of commercial conferences also to large extent debars practitioners from smaller agencies with lesser resources; they are thus far more a feature of life for senior corporate executives than their more junior colleagues or agency counterparts.

During my research, however, I held a part time position with *Ethical Consumer* magazine\(^{29}\) which facilitated invitations to a number of events relevant to the broad scope of my research, enabling engagement and discussion with a range of practitioners in the wider sustainability communications field. Such events included: speaking at commercial events on “green marketing”; attending the launch of The Co-operative Group’s new Ethical Operating Plan; and participating in a roundtable discussion organised by *the Guardian* on ethical consumption.\(^{30}\) I would characterise my research practice at these events as “observing participation” rather than “participant observation”; as reflexive examination of professional experience rather than purposeful ethnography (Grandclement and Gaglio, 2011: 90).

Various online forums offer practitioners the opportunity of discussion, expertise requests, sourcing of professional opinion, promotion of events and so forth. I have utilised online forums throughout my research, largely for observation of discussions but occasionally prompting discussion on key topics. I detail this participation in Appendix Two.

### 3.2.5 Mapping the Market

As an emerging field, sustainability communications lacks a professional organisation in the UK which might collate statistics on its size and composition. Nor do any of the interest groups representing the commercial communications professions in the UK produce such information. Searches of both academic and business literature did not locate a mapping of the UK sustainability communications market. I therefore conducted a web based mapping of the market, in several iterations. The final iteration of the mapping exercise was conducted in June 2012, producing a list of 102 firms.

---

\(^{29}\) As Co-editor of *Ethical Consumer* magazine and a Board Director of the Ethical Consumer Research Association.

Firms were included in the mapping exercise if sustainability or CSR communications was a core service offering. Firms were excluded if they appeared to be single person enterprises, as the intention was to produce an overview of organisations. However it should be noted that individual consultants are quite common in the field. Consultants may be associated with one or more network based organisations, consisting of a small core team and freelance associate network.

Four online directories were searched: the Direct Marketing Association’s membership directory; CorporateRegister.com’s ‘ReportingPartner’ directory; EthicalPerformance.com’s ‘CSR Professional Services Directory’; and RecommendedAgency.com, an online sourcing tool for marketing professionals. In addition, web searches were conducted using a range of key words, including for example “corporate responsibility communications” and “green marketing”. Information, where available, was collated from agency websites on key features such as agency age, size, service offering, and client base as well as key text relating to the agencies’ own marketing and any positioning statements. This is not an exhaustive mapping of the market but I am confident it is representative.

3.3 Analysis

The core of the key research questions were developed very early in the research (the ethnographic questions were added somewhat later) and provided an organisational frame for the analytical process. Analysis is a dialogue between theory and data (Burawoy, 1991: 5-6). The early stage of this process involved identifying key thematic areas that resonated with both concepts in relevant literature and data sources. For example, analysing my first pilot interview as part of a methods training exercise, it was apparent that the informant, a researcher in an NGO discussing consultancy work for a corporate client on consumer expectations around sustainability, was engaged in a process described by Slater and Tonkiss wherein expert knowledge workers construct “‘virtual consumers’ constructed in their own image” (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 178), a concept with obvious resonances with the capacity of cultural intermediaries to instantiate their own dispositions through cultural production. “Virtual consumers” therefore became an analytical category which I looked for in other data sources to examine whether it was worthy of generalisation and further exploration.

Similarly early on in documentary sources, online discussion forums and conversations with practitioners the theme of “authenticity” emerged as a recurrent notion both articulated in relation to brands and sustainability. This resonated strongly with accounts in the critical literature on CSR (e.g. Fleming, 2009) and brands (e.g. Holt, 2002).
Obviously developing analytical themes is an iterative process, as themes are elaborated in further reading, instances collected in data sources and further explored in observations and interviews. Some early themes fall away, others come to be elaborated and organise larger areas of work, informing the development of interview questions, directed data searches and so forth. This process occurs both as lines of enquiry prove unfruitful and through necessary delimitation. Thus one early theme - “the dialectic of commercial and academic knowledge” (Lury and Warde, 1999) – which occasioned considerable early reflection is not reflected in the current thesis. On the other hand “virtual consumers” became elaborated into the typology of instantiation in Chapter 9 and authenticity became a linking theme to the three topics of brand-sustainability relations presented in Chapter 10. Productive thematic areas therefore led to concept development which informed further analysis.

Analysis of fieldwork data was particularly challenging as participant observation tends to produce large amounts of observational data that is not easily thematically structured. While the above process of thematic development leading to theory building represents inductive reasoning I did not approach the fieldwork from a grounded theory position (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001) but, on the contrary, deductively, applying practice theory to address the key institutional questions noted earlier. Thus fieldwork notes were often structured around Warde’s (2005) typology of understandings, procedures and engagements. In the analysis of fieldwork data there was a dialectic between the pre-structuring of this deductive process and inductive analysis.

I did not apply a formal coding of data beyond organisation by key ordinary language concepts attendant to the field (e.g. consumer, brand, market), inductive analytical themes, and deductive practice theory categories. Nor did I employ qualitative analysis software, although NVivo was investigated for suitability, as traditional analogue methods were found sufficient.

Atkinson and Coffey (2003) argue against the privileging of participant observation data over interview data as somehow less mediated experience that does not entail social interpretation. Traditionally the one is seen as observation of social action and one the account of social action. However, accepting the co-constituent production of meaning in interviews is to accept interviews themselves as social action. Atkinson and Coffey conclude that both types of data can be seen as “enactments” of social life. This approach resonates with the “practice theoretical assumption about the mundane performativity of social life” (Halkier and Jensen 2011: 109). It is particularly pertinent

Theory development about the field was also taken back into the field for verification in late stage interviews. This is not to say that all theory should be recognisable to practitioners, but the practice perspective suggests that many of the features of a field that can be represented should be recognisable to some extent by practitioners. Finally, triangulation was carried out with a wide range of documentary sources as detailed above.

Throughout the thesis I employ a synthesis of data types, with however different emphases. Chapters Four through Six draw on academic accounts, documentary analysis and interview material. Chapters Seven and Eight present material from the fieldwork but also draw on key informant interviews. Chapters Nine and Ten draw chiefly on documentary sources to extend the analysis, but again draw on fieldwork and interview material in addition.

3.4 Conclusion

I have approached the project as an experiment in the application of practice theory, already productively utilised in the study of sustainable consumption at the level of end-use, to an arena of cultural production relevant to sustainability. In order to address the key research questions presented at the start of the chapter rich data was required that could inform: an understanding of the historical contexts from which the field developed; how the practice complex of sustainability communications came to coalesce and cohere; how the field is currently structured and how its practices are performed; and how the site of cultural production links to larger social milieu and wider phenomena.

The methodological strategy therefore drew on a range of methods – participant observation, key informant interviews, historical reading, and documentary research into the historical contexts, practitioner literature and the products of sustainability communications itself. Such diverse sources of data present a challenge to analysis and potentially a certain loss of coherence or focus. In order to mitigate these difficulties I have attempted throughout the project and the writing of this thesis to frame the focus through the key research questions, which are themselves indebted to and contextualised by the theoretical orientation of practice theory.
PART TWO

Chapter Four: A Genealogy of Sustainability Communications

“The communications industry is the only agency possessing the capacity to convey the knowledge necessary for sustainable development to the required extent and in the timeframe we have at our disposal.”

*Lester Brown, Worldwatch Institute, 1998* (in Klanten et al., 2012:2)

“[I]t is the methods of communicating environmental conditions and ideas, and not the state of environmental deterioration itself, which explains the emergence of a public discourse of the environment. To politicise [“needs tied to the collective good ‘nature’”] requires them to be communicated—they have to be made political.”

*Klaus Eder* (1996: 209-211)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the historical research questions posed in the previous chapter: *What historical accounts are necessary to explain the discourses and understandings employed in commercial sustainability communications? What accounts are necessary to explain why the practices are performed as they are?*

I situate the rise of sustainability communications within the context of three concomitant trends: the development of the environmental and ethical consumption movements; the development of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); and the development of brand management. Firstly, it is from these historical contexts that the discourses and understandings inherent to the practice of sustainability communications derive. Secondly, it is the historical process that intertwines these contexts that explains, to a large extent, why the practices of sustainability communications are performed as they are. These key developments structure the field in important ways, shaping the way that actors perform within it and are orientated to one another.

These interlinked developments—environmentalism and ethical consumption, CSR, and brand management—address, respectively: the emergence and diffusion of the problematisation of consumption that the field addresses; the response to, and adoption by the sphere of production of the political rationality of that problematisation (Barnett et al, 2011); and the deployment of
techniques for the productive operationalisation of that new rationality. This is to present each development as part of the genealogy of sustainability communications.

This is to follow a Foucauldian route, analysing practices in terms of their modes of problematisation - how and why certain things become a problem – not as the effects of historical tendencies but as indicative of strategic interventions. Foucault suggests:

“[T]he analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience or set of practices which were accepted without question... becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviour, habits, practices and, institutions.” (Foucault 2001: 74)

While my primary focus is the agency market, the account is also a genealogy of corporate sustainability. It is one possible genealogy of corporate sustainability. The focus on sustainability communications determines the selection of the pertinent historical contexts (environmentalism, CSR, brand). Other trends would usefully inform a wider genealogy of corporate sustainability. 31 Appendix Three provides a timeline of key events that frame the development of corporate sustainability in the UK.

4.2 Environmentalism and Ethical Consumption

“The environmental movement no longer dominates the discourse on the environment... Can the environmental movements now survive this marketplace of communication on the environment?” (Klaus Eder, 1996: 203)

This section argues that the mainstreaming of the discourse of sustainable development and the professionalisation of environmentalism laid the enabling foundations for the post-millennial explosion of corporate sustainability initiatives. This process accompanied the diffusion of systems ecology from a scientific discourse to a widely held cultural discourse, via the social movement of environmentalism. This cultural shift provided fertile ground for the interventions of environmental

31 For example, were my focus on firms specialising in sustainability strategy the development of management consultancy and the rise of “audit culture” would have been a pertinent context to address (Strathern, 2002; Power, 1997). For an account of the colonisation of professional jurisdictions by the major management consultancy firms in the 1990s, which has extended into sustainability strategy, see Suddaby and Greenwood (2001).
and ethical consumption protest groups, leading to the widespread diffusion of the problematisation of consumption (Barnett et al, 2011). Amongst these interventions, mediatised “market campaigns” (Harrison, 2005) directed against consumer brands, and transnational corporate capitalism in general, have been successful in mobilising publics, leading to sections of corporate capitalism coming to adopt the perspective of problematised consumption and elements of a systems ecology worldview.

4.2.1 The Rise of the Discourse of Sustainable Development

“Now, through purporting to take in hand saving the environment, capitalism invents a new legitimation for itself: the sustainable and rational use of nature.” (O’Connor, 1992: 125-126)

Writing in 1989, Eyerman and Jamison reflected that despite “environmental organisations riding on a new wave of public concern...it makes little sense to speak of a unified environmental movement” (1989: 1-2). The radical “new social movements” of the 1960s and ‘70s that had formed the “second wave of environmentalism” were not at the forefront of this “third wave” revival (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989; Guha, 2000). They had given way to the emergence of “a transnational political actor network dominated by professional organisations” (Jamison, 1996) – the powerful environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, the World Resources Institute and the World Wildlife Fund - well financed and highly professionalised.32 It was, argues Jamison (1996), these powerful environmental NGOs which were the most active forces in shaping global environmental discourse up to the ‘Rio Earth Summit’ in 1992 (the UN Conference on Environment and Development), transforming environmentalism into a discourse where global environmental problems took over from local issues as the fundamental concerns.33

The international environmental NGOs helped shape, and became part of, the novel political space of the emerging global environmental governance system (Princen and Finger, 1994). A new cadre of sustainable development experts moved between the NGOs and organisations like the UN

32 For accounts of the environmental movement up to this period see Guha (2000), Jamison et al (1990), Jamison (2001) and McCormick (1989).

33 This is not to say by any means that the 1992 Rio Summit is universally regarded as a victory for environmentalism. Critics see it as the juncture at which multinational companies and free market ideology hijacked the global environmental agenda (see Bruno, 1992; Mayhew, N., 1997).
Environment Programme, the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility (Jamison, 1996). Moreover at the same time industry began to adopt new methods – such as cleaner production processes, environmental management systems and auditing – and a new profession of eco-managerialists technically qualified to deal with ‘the ecological crisis’ emerged from the new university departments of environmental science (see Luke, 1999).

Indeed according to Jamison, there was in some respects a convergence of interests and practices between environmental NGOs and multinational corporations:

“It is in the interests of both types of actors to construct a global environmental problematique; the new global message helps provide new audiences and research tasks for the NGOs, and new markets...for the corporations” (1996: 234).

Crucially, according to Jamison (1996), there was a convergence between NGOs and business in the form of communications deployed and the nature of the programme to be pursued:

“[T]he problems of environmental destruction have been framed – or constructed – in such a way as to lend themselves to mass media advertisements...the assumption...is that global environmental problems can be solved through new technologies and/or committed professional activists” (ibid).

Jamison’s disdain at submitting environmental issues to the vernacular of commercial communications was commonplace amongst environmentalists of the time. The international environmental NGOs’ embrace of the commercial arts of persuasion therefore represented a decisive shift. These developments were taking place in the context of a profound shift in environmental discourse, to the discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernisation. The programmatic statement of sustainable development was the 1987 ‘Brundtland Report’ of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The 1992 Rio summit saw global political recognition of the ‘ecological crisis’ and sustainable development sanctified as its solution – to be put to work through the institutions of global governance, such as the Global Environment Facility (see Young, 2002) and the voluntary ‘global action plan’ Agenda 21.

---

34 This position can be overstated, as can complicity of NGOs as actors in the global environmental governance system. NGOs aggressively challenged the role of multinational corporations at Rio (Bruno, 1992) and at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development a coalition of NGOs led calls for a Convention on Corporate Accountability (FoE, 2001) which was rejected in favour of corporate self-regulation proposed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development lobby group, successor to the corporate coalition created at Rio (see Christian Aid, 2004).
From its outset this global consensus on sustainable development hid fundamental disagreements around the relation of ecological sustainability and economic growth (Foster, 1996) and the commodification of nature; or “nature conceived in the image of capital” as eco-socialist Martin O’Connor put it at the time (1992: 96).

Unlike the Club of Rome’s hugely influential 1972 *Limits to Growth* report (Meadows et al, 1972), Brundtland argued that economic growth and environmental sustainability were compatible. Through the processes of resource efficiency, substitution and institutional reform, economic growth would be progressively decoupled from negative environmental impacts. Indeed, under Brundtland “reviving economic growth” was one of the “critical objectives” of sustainable development (Næss and Høyer 2009:74). Developing out of a social democratic tradition, growth for Brundtland was the prerequisite for global distributive justice (Harvey, 1999).

Furthermore, policy statements from the Rio summit emphasized the need to address both production and consumption, and consumers therefore became relevant actors, sharing responsibility for sustainability with producers through demand for more environmentally friendly products (Christensen, et al., 2007).

Sustainable development puts great store in expertise: faith that technological innovation can decouple growth from environmental damage, and that knowledge is sophisticated enough to reveal the safe limits of natural exploitation (Hajer and Fisher, 1999:5). It is a reform-oriented discourse premised on the basic tenets that sustainability can be achieved through institutional reform, technological innovation and managerial solutions. As such it represents a radical break from the cultural and economic critique inherent to the radical environmentalism of the 1960s and ‘70s (Hajer, 1995; Hajer and Fischer, 1999; Sachs 1999). Technology and expertise replaced social transformation and participation.

---

35 The journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* has offered a sustained critique of sustainable development. For a programmatic statement in the immediate aftermath of ‘Rio’ see O’Connor (1993).

36 For a recent restatement of the decoupling position, explicitly positioned as a contemporary response to Brundtland, see Smith et al (2010). For a recent critique see Jackson (2009).

37 For a critique of the former position see Banerjee (2003), for a critique of the latter position see Taylor (1999).
The academic discourse of ecological modernisation provided a theoretical underpinning to sustainable development. Ecological modernisation regarded economic activity as inherently environmental harmful and therefore proposed a more integrated stance towards regulation and governance than the piecemeal approach that had begun to be adopted in the developed world in the 1970s (Baker, 2006). A multi-scalar form of governance was developed, tacitly recognising the multiple scales of environmental problems (Harvey, 1999) and reflecting both its origin in the UN-based institutions, and the important role taken by the European Union in promoting and disseminating the new orthodoxy. Ecological modernisation became the bedrock of EU sustainable development policy (Baker, 2006; cf Baker et al., 1997).

The systematic institutional arrangements and regulatory practices of this new mode of governance gave a key role to the relationship between government and industry, with standard setting, multi-stakeholder groups and voluntary agreements playing an important complementary role to legislation. Consumer-oriented policies, including policies of behaviour change, also formed part of the project (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000; Mol and Spaargaren, 2000).

This accommodation to the economic orthodoxy of the growth imperative, the emphasis on expertise and institutional reformism and the integration of industry to governance structures opened the way for this new discourse of sustainability to achieve rapid diffusion. Such that by 1996 Klaus Eder could write: “ecological discourse is becoming the common ground on which collective actors meet in today’s public discourse and public space” creating “new options for legitimising institutions and creating consent” (1996: 204). For Eder it was already a “major element in the legitimating ideology of advanced modern societies” (ibid: 207) resting on a “consensus that nature is a collective good” (ibid: 211).

---

4.2.1.1 The Diffusion of Ecological Understanding

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) offer a suggestive account of social movements as “knowledge producers” which, in times of transition, formulate new kinds of understanding, define new “knowledge stakes” and create new techniques and practices. These novel understandings and practices are then taken up by other actors, and transformed in the process. Eyerman and Jamison’s suggest the “cognitive praxis” of social movements has three empirical dimensions - a cosmological dimension, a technical dimension and an organisational dimension (1991: 68); or respectively, reflective, or emancipatory, knowledge, instrumental knowledge and administrative knowledge (Jamison, 2010). Cognitive praxis is an “integrative activity bringing together new...ideas about reality, with the identification of new problems and issues in innovative organisational settings” (Jamison 1996:239).

Crucially, such integrated praxis is temporary; other social actors incorporate elements into their own projects, and in so doing may radically transform them (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). By the end of the ‘80s the three dimensions ceased to be integrated into a social movement, but elements had been incorporated into the discourse and practice of other actors – and increasingly into the corporate world (Jamison, 1996, 2001, 2010).

In the case of environmentalism, Jamison stresses “what was especially important was the translation of [the cosmological dimension]... [of] the language of systems ecology into a social and political programme” (1996: 239). The discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernisation were the vehicles for the widespread diffusion and dissemination of this ecological world view.39 Eder defines this diffused “ecology” as “a way of looking at nature in which scientific expertise, ethical concerns and aesthetic judgments have been integrated into a coherent ideological framework that provides common ground for collective actors”40 (1996: 217, n. 3).

39 The other lineage for the diffusion of complex systems thinking is that of chaos theory and dynamical systems theory in mathematics, which gained an increasingly popular reception over a similar period to that of systems ecology. Indeed James Gleick’s Chaos: A New Science, which introduced a broad public to the “butterfly effect” and fractal geometry, became a best seller in 1987 just as the systems ecology worldview was being translated from the environmental movement to a wider public through the discourse of sustainable development.

40 He goes on to make a useful comparison: “An analogous status in modern history could be attributed to the concept of ‘welfare’ which combines elements of social justice, economic efficiency and a kind of ‘New Deal culture’. Both master-frames, ecology and welfare, refer to basic codes of modern culture – above all its coding of progress” (Eder, 1996: 217 n.3).
Indeed, it has become so much of a cultural common sense that it is easy to miss, even from our recent historical perspective, the profundity of this shift. By the mid ‘90s business strategist James F. Moore could find a receptive audience for his metaphor of the “business ecosystem,” winning the Harvard Business Review’s article of the year award in 1993, drawing on ecology and Gregory Bateson’s systems theory to offer business a “new paradigm” of “complex adaptive systems” (see also Moore, 1996).

The technical dimension, suggests Jamison, underwent profound transformation from that of the “appropriate technology” of environmentalism to the “clean production” of ecological modernisation (1996: 240). The question as to whether such a profound change represented a form of continuity at all need not detain us here. For my purposes, the key point to note is that when sustainable development was translated into corporate sustainability it led to the creation of a whole raft of new technical and calculative practices of monitoring and auditing which enabled the institution of sustainability reporting, creating a new, dedicated, sustainability business function and a new market for sustainability communication services (see following section).

As for the organisational dimension, Jamison suggests the participatory and anti-elitist discourse and practices of environmentalism were usurped by an emphasis on expertise and professionalisation. Here, I suggest against Jamison, that rather than the organisational praxis of environmentalism becoming defunct, it has been appropriated by corporate capitalism as part of a novel cultural politics of work, which I address in Section 10.3. Ironically, while corporate capitalism did appropriate organisational resources from counter-cultural environmentalism, the environmental NGOs “served to take environmental activism out of the hands of amateurs and place its funding, its management, and the articulation of its message into the hands of professional advertising men, media and management consultants, and policy experts” (Jamison, 1996:232). I return to the dynamic of professionalisation in Chapter Five.

In summary, a discursive framework drawing on the ecological world view became widely disseminated, in the European public sphere at very least, becoming the ground on which the

---

41 The professionalization of environmental protest, however, remained in dialectic with ‘amateur’ direct action. For example Chris Rose acknowledges that it was the direct action of the 1990s anti-roads movement that inspired him to renew Greenpeace’s campaign strategy (Rose, 2012). Post-millennium grass roots direct actions groups such as Plane Stupid and Climate Camp maintained this dynamic relation to the NGOs.
politics of the ecological implications of capitalism and modernity is fought. 42 The cognitive praxis of the environmental movement, then, translated through the discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernization, laid the foundations for the emergence of the discourse of corporate sustainability. Sustainable development became a technical project for which the capitalist corporation was deemed an appropriate vehicle.

4.2.2 Market Campaigns and Ethical Consumption

There is a counter-narrative to this account of the accommodation of environmentalism to political and economic power. It is the story of how, during the 1990s, environmentalists and other campaigners, developed strategies to directly challenge corporate activities, largely by mobilising public opinion through mass media. The scope here needs to be widened beyond the environmental movement to other campaign groups focusing on the broad range of social and political issues often referred to as ethical consumption43 – such as, inter alia, workers’ rights in globalised supply chains, ‘trade justice’ and human rights, animal welfare, and corporations’ influence on political processes.

Over the last twenty years or so the success of such campaigns in achieving their strategic goals of changing corporate behaviour has been considerable, in diverse domains.44 Such campaigns typically combine a number of tactics, such as awareness-raising and fund raising communications, boycotts,

42 The role of industry and consumers in sustainable development has led, predictably, to charges of collusion with neo-liberalism (Baker, 2006). The institutionalisation of sustainable development and ecological modernization is accused of serving to circumscribe debate (Hajer and Fischer, 1999) and minimize systemic change while ignoring issues of equity and social justice (Banerjee, 2003; Blowers 1997). Harvey (1999) suggests more optimistically: that there is some evidence that elements within the EU bureaucracy saw ecological modernization as a bulwark against “narrower national and corporate interests”; and that while the discourse could not have achieved the position it has “without a significant tranche of support from the heartland of political-economic power”, nevertheless through the opening of ecological modernisation “quite a bit of radicalization has been achieved”, with radical environmental groups deploying the discourse tactically (1999: 168).


44 Useful reviews of such successes are provided by Clouder and Harrison (2005), and Conroy (2007).
and shareholder actions, as well as demonstrations and direct action focused towards media promotion, integrated into an overall strategy directed to achievable goals. The effectiveness of such “market campaigns” (Harrison, 2005) led to the rapid dissemination of the strategy across campaign groups, which, moreover, began to see themselves as part of a broad “anti-corporate” (see Crossley, 2002; Edwards, 2004; Klein, 2000) or “corporate accountability movement” (Bendell, 2004; Broad and Cavanagh, 1999); actively sharing tactics and information (Harrison, 2005).

While a number of trends have contributed to the rise of market campaigns – notably economic globalisation, the growth of mass media and of information and communications technology – for my purposes it is important to note that this rise must be seen as integrally connected to the growing cultural importance of brands (Holt, 2002; Klein, 2000; Lewis and Potter, 2011). As Knight notes, promotionalism is reflexive and self-problematising in character (cf Section 10.4):

“It is not only a solution to corporate communication and identity, but it is also a source of new problems that result precisely from the side effects of success” (2002: 553).

Such campaigns have increasingly targeted “everyday consumption as a surface of mobilisation for wider, explicitly political aims and agendas” (Barnett et al 2010: 13). The broader milieu of ethical consumption is routinely characterised as the demand side to corporate sustainability’s supply side. This section does not set out to provide an account of the diverse field of ethical consumption but rather to challenge this characterisation in the context of the role of market campaigns in the development of corporate sustainability and the rise of the commercial field of sustainability communications. I return to this point in Chapter Eight.

An influential account of ethical consumption is found under the banner of “political consumerism”. Arguing against a popular critique that represents ethical consumption as a withdrawal from political participation and civic activity, as de-politicising individualisation, and evidence of intensified marketization and commodification in contemporary society Micheletti and others argue that consumer activism represents legitimate political participation (Boström et al., 2005; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti and Føllesdal, 2007; Micheletti and Stolle, 2007; Micheletti et al., 2003, Spaargaren and Mol, 2008). Political consumption practices, it is argued, are both individual and collective; by addressing responsibility for achieving ‘the good life,’ private and public virtue can be reconciled (Micheletti, 2003: 18-24).
Consumer choice in this account is a new medium of political action, a “politics of products” (Micheletti, 2003) through which markets are politicised. Political consumerism is taken as indicative of wider historical trends of de-traditionalisation, reflexive modernisation, and shifts in forms of governance. The political consumerism approach assumes that ethical consumption should be primarily understood in terms of effective consumer demand as the medium through which preferences of consumers and the records of businesses are signalled in the market place.

However, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007: 473) point out that focussing on consumer attitudes and values loses sight of the role of other actors’ strategies aimed at markets and regulation, and how those actors frame and mobilise consumers. Barnett et al extend this point productively, challenging the assumption that ‘the consumer’ is the primary agent of change in efforts to politicise consumption practices (2011: 16). Barnett et al draw on a practice theoretical account of consumption, in which the “trend is an outcome of organized efforts by a variety of collective actors to practically re-articulate the ordinary ethical dispositions of everyday consumption” through two key modes: discursive engagement; and the provision of enabling devices, in which: “…‘the consumer’ is not so much a locus of sovereignty and agency as it is a rhetorical figure and point of identification only contingently related to the politics of consumption” (2011: 19).

Rather than the historicist approach of political consumerism, which universalises the consumer and regards its object as an effect of the dynamics of macro-tendencies such as individualization or de-traditionalisation, Barnett et al follow a Foucauldian route, focusing on the strategic efforts of collective actors to problematise the formerly unproblematic, invisible and taken for granted. Ethical consumption is, they argue, better understood “as an organised field of strategic interventions” (2011: 13) in which consumption is taken up as the object of problematising discourse. Rather than see this process as one in which the interventions of activist actors attempt to convert sovereign consumers to a new ethical value-set (see Chapter Nine), we can see it as one seeking to problematise the understanding of consumption for multiple actors—consumers, workers, producers, policy makers and cultural intermediaries—whose activities relate to consumption in different ways.

Barnett et al’s (2011) focus is primarily on interventions addressed to publics and their intermediaries. However, a specific type of intervention – market campaigns, which mobilise publics to directly change corporate behaviour – have played a particularly significant role in the
development of corporate sustainability practices. Indeed, this claim is uncontroversial – the significance of the rise to prominence of market campaigns in the 1990s is widely acknowledged in both accounts of the development of corporate sustainability and anti-corporate activism (e.g. Elkington, 1998; Corporate Watch, 2006; Harrison, 2005; Heap, 2000; Klein, 2000; Visser, 2011; Waddock, 2008; Watts, 1998). Such campaigns were primarily communication campaigns, in which the new cadre of NGO communication professionals, and their allies in commercial communications, fought over public opinion with corporate communications.

Seminal examples, routinely cited by commentators (and indeed several of my key informants) include Greenpeace’s 1995 Brent Spar campaign and the ‘anti-sweatshop campaign’ by diverse groups against labour conditions in Nike’s supply chain, throughout the decade. I will use the Brent Spar campaign as an entry point to the following two sections (4.3 and 4.4).

In 1995 Greenpeace activists occupied the Brent Spar oil platform, owned by Royal Dutch Shell, which it intended to sink it in the North Atlantic as a method of low cost disposal. Initially the company argued its case on technical grounds, but facing massive public support for the campaign across Europe, spontaneous consumer boycotts leading to a considerable drop in sales and a plummeting share price, Shell conceded to the campaign’s demands (Rose, 1998). Its rapid escalation and denouement contrasts other market campaigns, such as the long and incremental Nike sweatshop campaign; and part of Brent Spar’s historical significance lies in that fact. Writing two years after the campaign in the New Statesman, Robin Grove-White noted that:

“[The] campaign was a watershed, marking the emergence of new ways in which markets can be subjected to social disciplining...For the first time, an environmental group had catalyzed environmental opinion to bring about the sort of change in policy that unsettled the very basis of executive authority.” (Grove White, 1997)

---

Barnett et al draw a distinction between ethical consumption and the kind of anti-corporate activism evoked here, based on the strategic deployment of the persona of the consumer (2011: 13); by contrast I stress the continuity, based on the shared project of problematising consumption.

For an analysis of the role of brand in the Nike case, congruent with the account of the “promotional public sphere” in Section 10.4, see Knight (2002). On the discursive struggle between Nike and its critics, see Waller and Conway (2011). For the legal issues of CSR disclosure raised by the case in the US, see DeTiene and Lewis (2005).

Indeed the term “political consumerism” emerged in Denmark in direct relation to the Shell boycott (Micheletti, 2003: x).
The campaign strategy was developed by Chris Rose, who had joined Greenpeace following his tenure as director of the environmental communication foundation Media Natura (see Section 5.2). According to Rose, the campaign’s success was “mould-breaking,” leading to the “real renewal of Greenpeace” (Rose, 2012). Shell’s strategic response was to launch a massive communications initiative along two axes – CSR, which I address below, and brand reputation, addressed in Section 4.4.

4.3 The Rise of Corporate Social Responsibility

The rise of CSR is an essential context for the understanding of the development of commercial sustainability communications. The rapid diffusion of CSR practices in the UK from the late 1990s was fundamental to the development of the field. In Chapter 5 I unpack the significance of the rise of CSR for the development of the agency market specifically.

Only a year before the Brent Spar campaign, Carroll had found that “academic leaders” in the management field accorded relatively little importance to the environment amongst “key issues for CSR research” (Carroll, 1994:14). Clearly the diffusion of an ecological viewpoint was spreading ahead of the purview of management experts.

Coinciding with the widely publicised campaign around Shell’s alleged complicity in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Nigerian activists, the view that the two campaigns marked a seminal moment was shared in industry. In the Saro-Wiwa case ecological despoliation, human rights abuses and corporate power in a globalised world were brought into sharp relief. Former Shell UK Chairman Malcolm Brinded commented in the wake of the scandals:

“[T]he days when companies are judged solely in terms of economic performance and wealth creation have disappeared. For us, Brent Spar was the key turning point, not only to Shell but to...industry in general.” (Visser, 2011: 75-76)

For Philip Watts, who had the misfortune of being in charge of Shell’s Nigerian operations during Saro Wiwa’s arrest and its European operations during the Brent Spar controversy: “It was a timely lesson in how the underlying expectations of the societies around us had changed” (Watts, 1998:26).

Shell’s response, according to Watt, explicitly led the corporation to clarify “its position on sustainable development,” noting that this was “expanded to include social objectives” (ibid.: 29). Tellingly, Watts noted that it was “quite a learning process for someone who had not been in the communications business before” (1998: 25; my emphasis).
The company interviewed around 10,000 people across 56 countries to garner perceptions of its reputation and policies, focusing on opinion formers in media, lobby groups, analysts and academia (Lewis, 2002: 16-17). The initiative led in 1998 to Shell becoming the first multinational company to publish a full, group wide CSR report: *Profit and Principles - Does there have to be a choice?* Shell’s central innovation was to adopt the notion of the “triple bottom line” — economic, environmental and social — championed by John Elkington of pioneering sustainability consultancy SustainAbility (Elkington, 1997); which, previously critical of the company, worked with Shell on the report.

The notion of CSR did not, of course, suddenly appear in 1995. Acknowledging earlier business writing on the social obligations of business, Carroll (1999) traces the “Definitional Construct” of corporate social responsibility back to the early 1950s in US business writing (1999: 270). Business writer Keith Davis popularised the notion that there was a long term business case for firms to attend to “reasons at least partially beyond the firm’s direct economic or technical interest” (Davis, 1960:70 in Carroll 199:271) and definitions of CSR “expanded during the 1960s and proliferated during the 1970s” (ibid:268). Harold Johnson’s 1971 *Business in Contemporary Society* gestured to what was to become a central concept to the understanding of CSR, the stakeholder (ibid: 273). In the same year the US Committee for Economic Development (CED) observed: “Business is being asked to assume broader responsibilities to society than ever before...its future will depend on the quality of management’s response to the changing expectations of the public” (ibid: 274).

---

49 Shell Canada had produced a 1991 report *Progress Toward Sustainable Development*, combining both environmental and social elements, arguably the first CSR report (Baker, 2003). The Body Shop’s *The Values Report 1995* is often regarded as the first full CSR report, placing the stakeholder dialogue process at the heart of the reporting function and integrating environmental, social and animal welfare issues (Bendell, 2000).

50 There is a vast (and largely uninformative) management literature on CSR, generally operating within a functionalist viewpoint (for a bibliometric analysis see De Bakker et al., 2005), and a far smaller, critical literature that treats corporations as political actors (e.g. Moon et al, 2005), addresses CSR as a PR exercise (e.g. Deegan, 2002; Starkey and Crane, 2003), or CSR from an ideological perspective (e.g. Banerjee, 2003, 2008; Jones , 1996), variously as a defensive ideological response to reputational challenges (e.g. Falkner 2003); a hegemonic response intended to set a limit to discourse on reform (Benson and Kirsch 2010); or a co-optation of critique (e.g. Crane, 2000c; Fleming, 2010). Gond and Matten (2007) provide a useful overview of the literature, pointing to more constructive approaches which approach CSR as a discursive, cultural product (e.g. Aguilera et al., 2007; Matten and Moon, 2008; Swanson, 1999), or from a practice or performative perspective (e.g. Mitnick, 2000; Rowley and Berman, 2000). Gond and Matten (2007) however largely ignore the neo-institutionalist work on CSR (e.g. Lammers, 2003; Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Windell, 2006) which can be brought into dialogue with a practice approach.
notes the CED was reflecting an important practitioner view of the changing social contract between business and society, responding to the emergence of the new social movements, environmentalism included (ibid: 275).

Common to these definitions is CSR as voluntary action outside of the economic and fiduciary requirements of the firm. However, an increased concern with philanthropy and community relations did not amount to any real innovation in business practice. Two other notions of CSR, however, are also apparent, and when operationalised would lead to innovations in practice. Firstly, the normative requirement for firms to conform to social expectations of behaviour, often referred to in the literature as ‘social license to operate’. And secondly, the broadly self-interested concern of the firm to contribute to the maintenance of the social order from which it benefits.

The normative requirement was expressed by Fitch in 1976 as the firm’s responsibility to address externalities: “Corporate social responsibility is defined as the serious attempt to solve social problems caused wholly or in part by the corporation” (Fitch, 1976: 38, in Carroll 1999: 281). Externalities however, required interlocution, and this was to be found in 1984 in R. Edward Freeman’s “stakeholder theory” – in which multiple actor groups affected by the firm’s actions were to be given voice, provoking the need for a new communicational practice (Freeman, 1984). In the same year, pioneering management consultant Peter Drucker articulated a notion of operationalising CSR which is now commonplace - the idea that business should convert its social responsibilities into business opportunities (Drucker, 1984). Stakeholder relations and an operationalised CSR would require the development of innovative management practices.

4.3.1 The Institutionalisation of CSR

As long ago as the early 1970s UK consultants Social Audit Ltd produced reports for companies such as Avon Rubber and Coalite on the social impacts of their operations (Gray, 2001:9; Elkington, 1998:52). But the practice languished, until it was revived by Ben & Jerry’s in a 1989 ‘Stakeholders Report’ (Tepper Marlin, 2003) and in the Body Shop’s groundbreaking 1995 Values Report. Similarly, John Tepper Marlin had proposed a form of quantified environmental reporting in The Journal of Accountancy in 1973 (Tepper Marlin, 2003), but it was not until the early 1990s that corporate environmental reports began to appear, reporting on the outputs Environmental Management Systems newly implemented by the new cadre of environmental scientists. In 1993 consultancy

51 The ISO14000 family of environmental management standards were developed in wake of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (ISO, 2009), progressively standardising practices of auditing and communication of environmental performance.
SustainAbility found only 27 major companies globally reporting on environmental or CSR issues (SustainAbility, 1993). By the mid ‘90s, with the discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernisation occupying important new positions, annual environmental reports were being produced in the hundreds (Elkington, 1998).\(^{52}\)

Probably the first systematic analysis of corporate environmental disclosure, SustainAbility’s 1987 *Green Pages*, located the coverage of issues in company Annual Reports.\(^{53}\) SustainAbility’s subsequent analyses of corporate environmental reporting in 1993 and 1994 described best practice as the production of *dedicated* environmental reports, along with audited disclosures demonstrating an understanding of the company’s material impacts and future quantified targets for improvement of environmental performance. *Dedicated* environmental reports enabled a different style to the public relations ethos behind the production of Annual Report more congruent with the demand for transparency underlying the practice (KI-16). Furthermore, dedicated reports suggested control under a separate business function to annual reporting, potentially less aligned to the financial imperatives of the Annual Report, and furthermore suggested specialist consultants dedicated to supporting that novel CSR business function.

The UNEP Global Reporters Benchmark Methodology, developed with SustainAbility, marks the shift to full CSR reporting; from 1994 to 1998, it applied to environmental reporting only; from 2000 it broadened to integrating social auditing, along the Shell reporting model (SustainAbility, 2012).

---

\(^{52}\) There were considerable national variations. Environmental auditing had a longer history in North America (Elkington, 1996) and Canada made early advances in environmental reporting. By 1998 54% of a sample of Canada’s largest businesses had begun to incorporate “sustainable development management and reporting” as part of their operations (Nitkin and Brooks, 1998).

\(^{53}\) SustainAbility was itself important in the development of environmental reporting, producing an influential study with WWF in 1990, *The Environmental Audit*. Its 1994 study was the first survey of corporate environmental reporting conducted with the United Nations Environment Programme (SustainAbility, 1994).
Practices associated with the ‘social bottom line’ followed a similar trajectory to that of the ‘environmental bottom line’, with pioneering organisations offering corporations the resources of novel auditing and reporting practices to respond to the exogenous shocks of NGO campaigns and concomitant concerns over increased regulation (Haufler, 2002). The New Economics Foundation led the development in the UK of the multi-stakeholder organisations AccountAbility, established in 1995, and the Ethical Trading Initiative, established in 1997, which helped define assurance and stakeholder engagement standards, and supply chain codes of conduct and auditing standards, respectively (see Waddock, 2008: 107-109).

As we have seen social audits were carried out as early as the 1970s but the practice did not spread as a management technique. Environmental auditing and reporting began to become more commonplace in the early 1990s and there were the first examples of combined social and environmental reporting. But it was not until the major reputational scandals of the mid 1990s onwards, that there was a widespread diffusion of CSR practices. Or in DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) terms institutional isomorphism occurred through a coercive process, only later followed by mimetic isomorphism.

The 1998 Shell report set the template for CSR reporting that diffused rapidly through North American and European owned multinational companies, and thereafter to smaller companies and wider locales. By 2000, the year Tony Blair appointed the world’s first minister for CSR, 45% of FTSE100 companies had begun issuing CSR reports (Idowu 2009); by 2010 the figure was 69%
The widespread diffusion of the practice of CSR reporting was fundamental to the institutionalisation of CSR within corporations and the development of a market in CSR consultancy services.

By 2003 a study of the CSR consultancy market (Young et al., 2003) found the field firmly established, combining expertise in management consultancy, communications and the technical aspects of environmental and social auditing. Young et al found a market composed of major, long established firms that had moved into the area, such as verification conglomerate SGS and professional services firms PriceWaterHouse Coopers and KPMG, a small group established as environmental services firms in the 1970s, and half of the 84 reviewed founded post 1993. Twenty-five of the companies were identified as in the sector “Image/PR/Communications/Media” (Young et al, 2003:10-16).

In summary, couched within the discourse of sustainable development, CSR reporting was positioned as a project of continual, calculable improvement to corporate sustainability performance and impact. The communicative project of CSR reporting brought into co-ordination a whole range of practices: social and environmental auditing practices enabling statistical aggregation (necessary for a range of indicators against which to assess progress); the communication practices of stakeholder engagement, as well as the writing, design and dissemination of the report itself; and the novel management practices that it both enabled, and which demanded it. The innovation of the CSR report was only possible with this enabling infrastructure, materialised in a dedicated CSR business function and a supporting consultancy market. I explore the performance of the practice CSR reporting from the perspective of the communications agency further in Chapter 8.

4.4 The Rise of Brand Management

*Brand Strategy* magazine noted in 2002:

“Shell’s ‘annus horribilis’...placed 100 years of brand building in jeopardy...Brent Spa and...Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria... made Shell realise to its detriment that its ethical policies were intrinsically linked to the value of its brand” (Lewis, 2002:16)

54 The calculable sustainability of the CSR report further provoked new practices of benchmarking CSR metrics across sectors. There is an intertwined story here, which space does not allow, of the development of socially responsible investment ratings, which begins in the UK in the late 1980s. The widespread availability of CSR metrics is such that they have recently been incorporated into Bloomberg terminals which deliver financial information to traders (see Marquis et al., 2011).
Later in the piece, rebutting the suggestion that Shell’s response to the controversies might be characterised as sophisticated PR, Tom Henderson, Shell’s Corporation Identity Communications Manager stressed: “Sustainable development is written into the group’s strategic direction” (ibid.: 17).

As we can see from the above example the practices of brand management compete with those of CSR to frame and inform corporate sustainability. And as we will see in the Chapter 5 sustainability communications agencies routinely offer services couched in terms of brand. In this section I chart the historical process that has brought this about. In Chapter 10 I go on to explore in depth the complex relations between brand and sustainability.

The business practices of branding and brand management have, over the last twenty years, not only become increasing important to business but have come to play a significant role in social and cultural life. For three influential sociological accounts - Arvidsson (2007), Lury (2004), and Moor (2004) - brands and the practices of branding, are defining features of the modern economic and social world. For Arvidsson, brands are the paradigmatic form of an “informational capitalism”; for Lury brands are the logos, in the Greek sense of animating and organising rationality, of the economic order.

‘Brand’ and ‘branding’ no longer simply refer, either in academic or practitioner accounts, to visual communication, nor to advertising or public relations campaigns. This extension of the meaning of brand is central to the historical development traced below. Lury cautions not to accord an ontological primacy to ‘brand’:

“[T]o assume the brand is a single thing would be to mistake the multiple and sometimes divergent layers of activity that have gone into producing the brand...diverse professional activities of marketing, (graphic and product) design, accountancy, management and the law. ” (2004:16)

For Lury “the object of the brand is defined by knowledge practices: those it partakes of and those that take place within it” (ibid.) and brand has come to serve as “the organisation of a set of relations between products and services” (Lury 2004:26).

Business discourse concerning branding has its origins in the large US consumer goods companies of the 1930s (Arvidsson 2006: 78). But the language of ‘branding’ has only become ubiquitous since the 1990s. In popular discourse today it is as readily applied to celebrities, cities, historical figures or political parties, as it is to commercial brands.
Of course brands in the sense of marks of ownership or origin are as old as commerce itself. The first great novelty in the development of brands saw brand marks take on the function of communicating values, with the advent of widespread commercial packaging and brand-name commodities from around the 1880s. The next widely recognised stage in the development of brands was the advent of industrial design, where the product itself becomes a communicative site. The market research revolution of the 1950s provided the informational context in which active brand management could emerge (Low and Fullerton, 1994; Moor, 2007). The idea of the brand as a symbolic extension of products was first introduced into business discourse in 1955 by Garner and Levy’s often-cited article “the Product and the Brand” (Gardner and Levy, 1955).

The growing economic importance of brands in the post-war years reached a new level in the 1980s and 1990s. The turn of the millennium would see both the launch of an academic Journal of Brand Management and the publication of Naomi Klein’s No Logo: Taking aim at the Brand Bullies. Brands had never been more prominent.

In 1988 branding consultancy Interbrand conducted the first ‘whole portfolio’ valuation of the brand equity of a company group. The following year the London Stock Exchange endorsed Interbrand’s methodology, allowing UK companies to formally recognise brands as assets on their balance sheets (Lury 2004: 120). The value of ‘intangible assets’ (including brands alongside other intangibles such as intellectual property) of non-financial businesses grew from 30% to nearly 50% between 1980 and 2000 (Arvidsson 2006: 90). Brand became conspicuous at this time as a motivation for company mergers and acquisitions, with intangible assets taken as a measure, like any other asset, as the worth now of future earnings. A study of acquisitions between 1981 and 1987 showed net tangible assets as a proportion of the amount bid for companies drop from 82% to just 30% (Lury, 2004:119). Moreover, brand equity was shown to be far less volatile than other business assets – tangible or intangible (Interbrand 2008: 5). Today a number of proprietary brand equity models exist (see Keller and Lehman, 2006).

4.4.1 The Institutionalisation of Brand Management

During the 1990s Moor notes: “a previously diverse set of practices – product design, retail design, point-of-purchase marketing, among others - became consolidated into an integrated approach to

---

55 See for example Eckhardt and Bengtsson (2010) and Wengrow (2008); the issue of pre-modern brands is not arcane, given the tendency for normative critiques (e.g. Wernick, 1991) to elide promotional practices with a meta-narrative of commodification (Williams, 2005).
marketing and business strategy known as branding” (2007:3). During this same period branding became institutionalised in the UK and the US in the form of branding consultancies, a new form of agency that challenged the pre-eminent position of advertising agencies (Moor 2007, 2008; Nixon 2002).

The language and principles of branding were disseminated through business and marketing texts in the 1990s, emerging not only from business schools but also from the new corporate identity and branding consultancies (Moor 2007:7). For these agencies, such dissemination was itself a promotional vehicle for their new competency.

On an institutional level branding emerged as a set of techniques arising in the mutation of design agencies into corporate identity consultancies from the 1980s onwards (Johansson and Holm 2006; Moor 2007). The ambition of branding extended beyond graphic or material design to the design of the organisation, claiming for itself managerial techniques formerly the preserve of management consultancy, in order to achieve a holistic integration of business functions with the brand.

The design revolution was accompanied by an expansion in the designer’s role to that of a “fully fledged symbolic intermediary...now expected to identify him or herself with consumer taste and both to interpret and shape it” (Moor 2007:30). James Pilditch, founder of one of the first UK design agencies, argued in his 1965 work *The Business of Product Design* for a extension of the designer’s horizon to “fields outside of his own...from production in the narrow sense to marketing in the widest” (1965:65-6 in Moor, ibid.).

This extension of horizon and claim to competencies was to expand further, from the design agency of the post-war years to the emphasis in the 1970s and ’80s on ‘corporate identity’ and beyond to the managerial ambitions of branding proper. The development of the practice of the “design audit,” in which material culture not traditionally thought of as a media channel are put to communicative work marks a way station in this process (Moor 2007). Arising in the context of trade globalisation and the increasingly transnational reach of corporations, the 'design co-ordination' (of material elements beyond packaging and advertising) of ‘corporate identity’ led to two key shifts that were fundamental to the emergence of contemporary branding practice.

Firstly, there was a shift to a perception of both multiple audiences and multiple channels of communication. This notion of multiple audiences opened up the possibility of a congruence with the ‘80s management idea of ‘stakeholders’. Thus one survey of the goals of corporate identity advertising in the 1990s listed a desire to improve: customer relations; stockholders and financial
relations; community relations; employee relations; 'image' reputation; as well as presenting stands on public issues (Schroder 1997). By the 1980s and '90s “product design itself was increasingly subordinated to an overall brand strategy or ethos” (Moor 2007:25).

The second innovation that arose with design co-ordination and corporate identity was a shift in timescale beyond that of the advertising or public relations campaign to that of years or decades – of necessity if corporate identity was to provide stability, and return on investment. This would open up the possibility of segueing brand management with the timescales required of sustainability initiatives.

Furthermore, the corporate identity consultant was conceived as an outsourced role, a “uniquely placed symbolic or cultural intermediary...mediating between the activities of producers and consumers” (Moor 2007: 31).

The 1980s and '90s saw corporate identity programmes begin to realise the scope of contemporary brand management (both internally and externally focused) and the rise of corporate (as opposed to product) branding. As the example of Shell shows by the end of the '90s brand management programmes had arrived. According to Heding et al (2008), who offer a taxonomy of brand management approaches based on a series of academic conceptual innovations, before the mid 1980s the dominant model was “the economic approach,” codified in the 1960s in positivist and empiricist marketing texts. By the mid 1990s this had been replaced by “the identity approach,” drawing on “socio-economic constructivism/interpretivism” and employing organisational culture studies and heuristic methods.

By the 1990s brand had largely effaced its original status as a mark of origin or quality; in certain instances, as Arvidsson (2007:5) suggests, to assume the use value of the product itself. Brands had come to adopt two important new roles. Firstly, brands became “a key locus for the reconfiguring of contemporary processes of production” (Lury, 2004: 17). Increasingly recognised as quantifiable intangible assets, brand became a principle for the organisation of production; by the 1990s 95% of the new product lines launched in the US were extensions of existing brands (Arvidsson 2006). Established brand offerings were demonstrably less risky for corporations and their investors. For this reason, product innovation and the strategic management of corporate expansion was increasingly organised around brands (Moor, 2007:37).

Secondly, brands played the critical role in a growing focus on the appropriation of value from consumer affect and social interaction (Arvidsson, 2007; Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011;
Zwick et al, 2008). Thus the key texts of brand management that gained growing influence as the 1990s progressed reversed the direction of brand value creation from that of the earlier 'corporate identity' understanding of marketer-to-consumer to that of consumer-to-marketer (Heding et al 2008).

Thus Keller (1993) developed the notion of “customer-based brand equity” – defined as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller 1993: 2). Plummer (1985) popularised the idea of “brand personality,” or the attribution of personality traits to brands in consumer research to explore ‘fit’ with the consumer’s personality. Subsequent innovations examined how brand personality enabled the consumer to express her own self, or ideal self (Aaker 1997). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) introduced the concept of “brand community” in an article that was, by 2007, one of the 20 most-cited papers in the field of economics and business worldwide (Thompson Scientific, 2009); confidently asserting that “brands are undeniably and fundamentally social entities, created as much by consumers as by marketers” (2001: 428).

While once brands were the symbolic extensions of products, increasingly products are becoming the material extension of the brand (Askegaard, 2006: 100). And where once the financial value of the brand resided firmly in the symbolic surplus of the product, that value is increasingly built upon calculations of accumulated consumer affect. Consumer co-creation of brand value has become the “new dominant logic of marketing” (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Payne et al., 2009).

The institutional novelty of branding in the UK in the 1990s was found in the emergence of dedicated branding agencies offering ‘total communications packages’ – business strategy, design expertise and marketing advice. Agency mergers saw the creation of bigger consultancies able to marshal greater spreads of expertise, affording integrated planning exceeding the scope of advertising agencies (Moor, 2007). Branding agencies challenged “the implicit hierarchies between different marketing functions” in some cases dethroning advertising agencies from their central positions (Moor 2007:43). The growing field of 'experiential marketing,' such as events co-ordination or producing branded spaces was outside of the remit of traditional advertising agencies. Branding experts explicitly claimed a superior expertise, offering an understanding of brand as subsuming responsibility for all aspects of corporate communications and offering to engage in strategic input.

As sustainability rose to prominence as a consumer issue, some branding agencies began to offer sustainability communications services. At the same time specialists in sustainability communications mobilised branding for their own ends; the success of branding in laying claim to
competence in increasing areas of business practice made it an attractive vector for developing the jurisdiction of the merging field.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the widespread diffusion of the discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernisation laid the foundations for the emergence of the discourse of corporate sustainability. A central effect of the diffusion of ecological understandings was the widespread problematisation of consumption. At the same time the professionalisation of environmentalism laid the foundations for the post-millennial explosion of corporate sustainability initiatives. Campaigns developed by the emerging cadre of NGO communication practitioners in the 1990s were instrumental in provoking “the amazingly rapid development of infrastructure and institutional building” of CSR (Waddock, 2008:29) and focusing corporate attention on sustainability communications. The institutionalisation of CSR represented the partial adoption by corporate actors of an ecological understanding and problematisation of consumption. The extent to which corporate actors now embrace a problematisation of consumption is evidenced by the speed with which market campaigns today often succeed in achieving their desired results. Corporate actors commonly now respond not to actual consumer backlashes but to the perceived attitudes of “imagined publics” (Walker et al, 2010).

In this brief genealogy I have foregrounded two very different dynamics. Firstly, Eyerman and Jamison’s (1991) notion of the cognitive praxis of social movements, and its dispersion, and secondly the impact of market campaigns on the institutionalisation of CSR. I suggest both represent field appropriate dynamics. I do not want to suggest, however, that market campaigns are the singular cause of CSR’s institutionalisation; clearly such processes are multi-causal. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that institutional isomorphism, or the homogenisation of organisational practices, occur through three analytically distinct processes – coercive, mimetic and normative. The process described here is clearly coercive – and the success of these market campaigns’ lay in changed cultural expectations, themselves the result of the diffusion of ecological understandings. While such coercive pressures continue I suggest they have been overtaken by mimetic and normative processes. In Chapter 8 I demonstrate these latter processes being carried by sustainability communications.

The rapidly diffused practice of CSR reporting initiated the development of a CSR consultancy market, in which communications played a key role. Concurrently practices of brand management
had become increasingly important and a new generation of branding agencies had emerged. In Section 4.4.2 I briefly alluded to a third dynamic – the self-problematising nature of brands (Holt, 2002; Knight, 2002). Brand became the locus for communicative struggle over corporate reputation in the “promotional public sphere” (Knight 2010). I return to this dynamic in Section 10.4. Brand management would begin to offer the possibility of using the resources of corporate sustainability for the productive operationalisation of the new rationality of problematised consumption, which I explore in Chapter Ten.

From the new CSR consultancies and brand agencies would arise the pioneers of the hybrid market of sustainability communications. This chapter has examined the historical accounts necessary to explain the practices and understandings employed in sustainability communications. In the following chapter we move on to an account of the formation of that hybrid market and the emergence of the sustainability communications as a novel complex of practices.
Chapter Five: The Rise of the Sustainability Communications Agency Market

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the development of the sustainability communications agency market. The chapter further informs the historical questions posed in Section 3.1 and begins to address the institutional questions: Which discourses and understandings are employed, and which excluded? What are the conflicts and constraints involved in the performance of commercial sustainability communications?

As we have seen in the preceding chapter the rapid diffusion of CSR practice from the late 1990s created a CSR consultancy market, in which communications was an important component. The ‘90s also saw the development of branding agencies, some of which would begin to enter the territory of sustainability communications. At the same time the integrated ‘communication agency’ appeared, offering services which might include corporate communications, branding and marketing. In 2001 and 2002 the first self-declared ‘sustainability communications agencies’ were founded; respectively, Futerra in London and Creative Concern in Manchester. By the end of the decade the giant global commercial communications groups would offer dedicated sustainability communications divisions or agencies, such as Saatchi and Saatchi S (Publicis Groupe), OgilvyEarth (WPP) and Clownfish (Aegis Media).

In this chapter I draw on secondary sources and interview material to produce an account of how the CSR and brand fields began to increasingly hybridise, forming the conditions for the emergence of the practice complex of sustainability communications. This chapter therefore continues to address the historical questions posed in Section 3.1, examining the formation of the field of commercial sustainability communications from the conditions explored in the previous chapter. In the second part of the chapter I address the different discourses at work in the formation of the field.

5.2 The Invention of Sustainability Communications

“The first time I went to the Shell building I was standing outside with a placard campaigning about what was going on in Nigeria. The second time I went to the Shell building I was on the twenty-first floor helping them launch their Sustainable Energy Review...I thought, if they mean it I’ll help them.” CSR Communications Consultant (KI-4)
“I got switched onto causes in my mid teens [in the ‘80s]...and that led me into left wing politics...But at the same time I was [...] fascinated by the world of advertising, and remember being very conscious that I felt my skills base would have worked well in advertising and marketing. But I had a realisation that politically I was wholly opposed to selling shit to sleepwalkers.” CEO, Sustainability Communication Agency (KI-12)

“Once dismissed as sandal-wearing extremists,” reported PR Week in 1996 “single issue pressure groups are now expert at getting support from the media and co-operation from business” (Goddard, 1996). The article was reporting on the unfolding public relations disaster of “two unemployed environmentalists from North London, locked in a courtroom feud with McDonald’s” – the infamous ‘McLibel’ trial, the longest libel trial in UK history, which Michael Mansfield QC dubbed “the trial of the century” (McSpotlight, 2012). For an informed opinion on the issue the journalist turned to John Grey, “chairman of Media Natura, a PR agency specialising in environmental development and social justice” (ibid.). Grey had become director in 1995, after a successful career running a “design consulting company which specialised in corporate identity and communication” with clients including Unilever, British Airways and, notably, Greenpeace (Demarco, 1998).

Media Natura was a new phenomenon. Was it a “PR agency,” or a “green design and media charity supported by a commercial consultancy” as the Independent called it two years later in Grey’s untimely obituary (Demarco, 1998)? Media Natura was set up in 1988 by Chris Rose, a campaigns officer with WWF, and John Wyatt, a film maker with a London media company. The two “[by] accident...had discovered a latent enthusiasm in the media industry” for supporting environmental and social causes. Rose would go on to join Greenpeace and run the Brent Spar campaign. The agency grew to develop a network of around “two thousand media suppliers from mainstream advertising agencies to marketing companies, stunt-men, designers and film-makers” who donated “many millions of pounds worth of resources” in pro bono and below market rates (Rose, 2012). The organisation “was originally set up to help pressure groups communicate better” (Goddard, 1996) but also both conducted commercial work and won funding from benefactors for communication projects (Rockerfeller, 1993). NGOs originally made up 80% of Media Natura’s consultancy income; but by 1996, Grey explained, the sector had “become hugely sophisticated in

---

56 Considering its pioneering role very little has been written on Media Natura. McDonagh (1998) published a brief case study on the organisation. The organisation folded after the death of director John Grey in 1998. Amongst other things Grey played a key role in setting up the Marine Stewardship Council in 1996, one of the first ‘multi-stakeholder’ organisations (Demarco, 1998). Media Natura founded the influential British Environment and Media Awards – the ‘Green Oscars’ – which were subsequently run by WWF (Rose, 2012).
their ability to manage the media and in their understanding of how to package stories”; it was by then companies such as Unilever and Sainsbury’s that made up 80% of its revenues (Goddard, 1996).

Media Natura was the proto-type of a sustainability communications agency. Drawing together expertise from the world of environmental campaigning, media, design, consultancy and corporate communications, it undertook commercial work, subsidised NGO campaigns, championed environmental and social causes, and operated according to an environmental and ethical charter (McDonagh, 1998: 597). Several of my key informants cited the influence of the organisation, one recalling workshops he had attended in the 1990s as a young NGO communicator (KI-12).

The novelty of the emerging field lay not wholly in the diffusion of largely new practices of social and environmental auditing and reporting but also the novel bundling of formerly disparate practices, and the incorporation into existing commercial communications practices of novel understandings (such as an ecological worldview), procedures (such as Media Natura’s charter) and engagements (such as a commitment to sustainable development) (Warde, 2005). The practices of commercial communications and civil society campaigning were being reconfigured and combined with the novel practices of CSR under a normative project framed by the discourse of sustainable development.

Competitive pressures and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) fostered “the functional rationalization of organizational structures and practices [within NGOs], resulting in tendencies towards the differentiation, formalization and professionalization” of roles (Knight, 2010: 187). From this process in the 1990s a new cadre of NGO communication professionals emerged, doing a new kind of communications. As one key informants recalls “Media Natura...did the first Cafe Direct ads ‘You get great coffee they get vaccines’- really mould breaking, you also had the first work for the Body Shop, and Greenpeace had actually gone into a really interesting strong ads zone” (KI-12). Alongside the NGOs, as we can see from Media Natura’s extensive network, were allies in that sector long regarded by environmentalists as “the dark arts of marketing and PR” (KI-4). And furthermore, personnel began to move between the two worlds.

---

57 The charter established both principles that Media Natura would act by and that they argued should be applied to the communications industry as a whole: inter alia, that the communications industry should be able to establish the legitimacy of link between the environment and any products or services it promotes; companies causing significant damage should not be portrayed as caring for the environment; misleading packaging should be banned (McDonagh, 1998: 597).
The “green consumer bandwagon” of the late ‘80s (Grant, 2008: 24) led to a rash of “green marketing” practice (and publications, see 3.2.3). But there were countervailing tendencies too – there was a consumer backlash against perceived poor product performance and cynicism at green claims by the mid to late ‘90s, with mainstream manufacturers withdrawing green product lines (Crane, 2000b). By the end of the 1990s, tensions has developed within the broad coalition around sustainable development between those articulating discourses of ecological modernization and natural capitalism (e.g. Hawken et al, 2000) on the one hand and those advocating a “critical ecology” on the other, that linked sustainable development to discourses of environmental and trade justice (Jamison, 2010). As the environmental movement underwent yet another dialectic between institutionalisation and radicalisation, a “flood of environmentalists left campaigning groups to work as environmental consultants” with business (Heap, 2000: 63), joining the new cohorts of environmental science graduates. Those from technical backgrounds could nevertheless find their way into communications, from strategic consultancy, or from setting up the new corporate Environmental Management Systems, thence to environmental reporting, thence to CSR reporting.

Alongside Media Natura, a handful of strategy and communications consultancies emerged specialising in environmental and social issues. John Elkington and Julia Hailes set up the hugely influential business strategy consultancy SustainAbility in 1987, establishing a model of for-profit consultancy, with strong links to the NGO world, following an explicitly normative project; the firm famously publicly “resigned” clients on environmental and ethical grounds, such as Monsanto in 1997 (Waddock, 2008: 187). The commercial success of the Body Shop was influential in supporting innovative communications agencies, such as “social change communications consultancy” Forster Communications, and St. Lukes, a co-operatively owned advertising agency, established in 1995.

---


59 For critical analyses see: Bluhdorn, 2007; Bourke and Meppen, 2000; Fischer and Hajer, 1999; Hajer, 1995; Jamison, 2001; Lukes, 1999; Newig, 2007; Schellenberger and Nordhaus, 2005.

60 In 1978 Elkington had set up Environmental Data Services which pioneered environmental and stakeholder auditing of companies in the UK, by 1981 writing the first environmental policies for companies like BP and ICI (Waddock, 2008: 179).

61 Having founded Munro & Forsters in 1985 Jilly Forster was director of communications and campaigns at Body Shop for seven years before setting up social marketing focused communications agency Forster Communications in 1996 (Forster Communications, 2011a)
In 1997 two Saatchi & Saatchi executives set up Good Business, a strategy and communications consultancy which set out to develop the market in integrating social issues and commercial brand management (see Hilton and Gibbons, 2002).

We can see in these examples of pioneers the axes of CSR, social marketing and brand management which characterise the distribution of practices across the hybrid field of the sustainability communications agency market as it is today. By the late 1990s this nascent consultancy market was servicing the growing demand for CSR communications, as well as NGO, public and third sector communications.

As we have seen, brand communications had begun to exploit ‘green marketing’ for the purposes of corporate reputation management. These often clumsy moves not only provoked consumer cynicism (Crane, 2000b; Schroder, 1997) but compounded an entrenched distaste amongst activists for marketing practice per se, as the second quote opening this chapter avers. However, towards the end of the decade there emerged the possibility of a synthesis between “new marketing” (Grant, 1999) practice and the motivation of professional activists to engage wide audiences with awareness and behaviour change communications. In his influential practitioner-facing book The Green Marketing Manifesto John Grant recalls:

“I met Jonathon [Porritt] in 2001 and he was very frustrated with the marketing world. His view of the stony ground for sustainable marketing was this: marketers simply didn’t get it! He had read one of my books and decided he could see a way forward. The old marketing paradigm was antithetical to green agendas…But the New Marketing, which I described [“of active customer engagement...to create new ideas, communities, events and lifestyles”] – was not at all incompatible with sustainability.” (Grant, 2007: 5)

---

62 For an account, see Law (1998).

63 As a caveat to this point, Key Informant 8, head of fundraising for Friends of the Earth (FoE) in the early 1990s, pointed out that the mass membership NGOs “were very sophisticated at communicating with their supporters, but nowhere near as sophisticated at communicating to the public and decision makers, which was almost exclusively media led...and didn’t communicate to business at all” (FoE had 120,000 members and 800,000 ‘contacts’ with them a year). We might note here that supporter communications are precisely the ‘preaching to the converted’ that the sustainability communications pioneers sought to move beyond.

64 Grant’s New Marketing Manifesto was in Amazon’s Top Ten Business Books of 1999; his influential Green Marketing Manifesto (2007) “applies New Marketing to the sustainability agenda”.
‘New marketing’ here, as Grant points out (2007:6), is effectively synonymous with brand marketing, with the idea of consumer co-creation at its core (Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Payne et al., 2009). Brand marketing thus seeks to inveigle itself into social practice. As such it has a certain commonality with social marketing, another important thread woven into the practices of the field.

Kotler and Levy first suggested the application of marketing techniques for non-commercial purposes in 1969, inaugurating the discipline of social marketing (cf. Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). It was not until the 1980s that the first widespread use of social marketing techniques in the English speaking world was adopted, firstly in health promotion campaigns and latterly environmental behaviour change communications, in response to the large body of research which demonstrated that traditional didactic models were largely ineffective (e.g. Andreasen, 1995; Goldberg et al., 1997; McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999). Subsequently, NGOs and government agencies deployed social marketing as the default approach to environmental behaviour change communications. With a mainstay of CSR communications being employee engagement and behaviour change, contemporary social marketers attest “corporate responsibility [is] a point of connection between commercial and social marketers” (Sharp, 2011).

Social marketing, CSR communications and creative communications (branding and ‘new’ marketing), therefore, came together in sustainability communications, sometimes practiced in their original form, sometimes hybridised, as Figure 3, below, illustrates.

---

65 E.g. Barr et al. (2006); Darnton and Sharp (2006); Collins et al. (2003); Futerra (2005); Jackson (2005); NESTA (2008); Platt and Retallack (2009).
The motivation for many of the founders of the sustainability communications field was the realisation of the limited efficacy of communication premised on an idea of communicative reason and the desire to mobilise the promotional and rhetorical to normative ends. Rather than simply adopting social marketing, sustainability communications sought to hybridise it with ‘new marketing’ and branding and to take social marketing back into the commercial world through the vector of CSR.

One pioneer recalled his motivations to found an agency explicitly dedicated to communicating sustainable development thus:

“I already knew that rational argument...didn’t work! Sex...humour [...] all that stuff that’s fundamental to make human beings tick is more important than [...] seven bullet points on why a vegetarian diet is the right thing to do.” (KI-12)

Similarly, another founder of a pioneering agency, recalled: "I must admit I was a kind of beardy deep-greeny ecologist bloke and I used to think if everybody would just wake up and see what’s obvious to me,” until a Damascene conversion that, “there must be a better way to capture hearts and minds - if you can make it engaging, if you can make it aspirational” (KI-9).
Thus a defining feature of sustainability communications is that while it is to greater or lesser extent conceived of by practitioners as a normative project, its marketing orientation foregrounds the instrumental success of specific communications over the explicit communication of values. Routinely contrasted with the self-limiting ‘worthiness’ of an earlier generation of ‘issues’ communication, the approach is perhaps best summed up in Futerra Communication’s white paper on climate change communication *Sizzle*: “If we want to change the majority, we need to change our message” (Futerra, 2009: 18).

5.2 Discourse and Practice in the Emerging Market

The above narrative account is a quite conventional one of individuals and organisations. This may seem odd in the context of a practice perspective, where practices not people are centre stage. However, disembodied practices do not stalk a world of objects. The careers of practitioners and the careers of practices are intimately bound up. Schatzki makes a useful distinction between two processes through which practices change. “Recompositions” of practices are “continual and largely unintentional” (Schatzki, 2002: 241): performances are not identical, leading to mutation; novel tasks accommodate new occurrences; practical understandings shift over time. “Reorganization of rules and teleoaffective structures” on the other hand, are “occasional and largely intentional” (ibid).

I suggest a core dynamic in the emergence of sustainability communications is such a re-organisation, championed by a relatively small group of pioneers. Thus literally the professional careers of this group can reveal characteristics of the field, as they carry practices into novel arenas and novel elements into practices. In that context I provide below three vignettes of key informant pioneers, which illustrate how a novel complex of practices that became known as sustainability communications came about.

*‘David’ Freelance CSR communications consultant (KI-4)*

After dropping out of university in 1987 and working for Greenpeace in Vancouver, David got a job in the UK with Friends of the Earth in 1991 in a team working on “waste, water and toxics”. He lead the team’s efforts on what would become the 1995 Environment Act, writing briefings for the Shadow Environment Secretary; “media work, stunts where we’d doorstep the Environment Minister wearing gas masks”. Then an opportunity arose to work for EDIT, an agency working for charities and the public sector: “they’d taken advantage of the desk top publishing revolution of the late ’80s to set up what we now understand as design and communication agencies. EDIT did things like subbed and designed Amnesty’s newsletter”. A year later a subdivision was launched to deal solely with
environmental communications for all sectors, including corporates, and it rapidly became so successful that the model was adopted for the company as a whole. “It was an opportunity to translate those social marketing skills...into the corporate sector. We’d noted this emerging field of environmental reporting and we had the editorial, design and technical writing skills to offer a service there. We take your complicated policy documents or whatever and create a version of it intelligible to the general public”. The company began producing environmental reports for organisations like Yorkshire Water and Eastern Energy, for whom David became involved in a pilot study developing the new Global Reporting Initiative guidelines (see Chapter Seven). “We then took this knowledge back into the public sector – we won a contract to write and structure the first Carbon Trust website. It was on the back of that, and getting it on the front cover of Design Week, we were able to sell the company in 2002 to Corporate Edge, a big branding and communications agency, mainstream annual reporting, and they saw the fit and the potential for expansion if they could bring in sustainability reporting alongside financial reporting. That’s when I went independent, I didn’t want to work for a big corporate communications agency, I wanted to stay in my niche.”

‘Quentin’ CEO Responsible Business Strategy and Communications Consultancy (KI-13)

“We didn’t go into this setting up a [...] sustainability agency. In ’94 we were running Saatchi and Saatchi Governments Worldwide [...] mostly political campaigning and we were increasingly aware of governments’ inability to change attitudes and how important that was becoming and that the passing of laws was becoming less an important component of government and that persuasion of people’s mindset was becoming more important...And on the other side, as a communications professional for many brands, we were seeing more and more businesses that wanted to ‘master-brand’ as we called it at the time - become bigger than the product, so British Airways wasn’t about flying A to B, it was about bringing people together, and in doing that what people understood about the business was not just what it did but the way in which it did it and that was actually very difficult to communicate that effectively. So the business came out of the understanding of those two things coming together. Brands wanted to have a bigger social role to give them greater meaning and purpose, and if that aligned to a social issue close to them you could also tackle some of the changes in attitude that governments were looking to achieve. It wasn’t called ‘corporate responsibility’...in the early ‘90s.” For Quentin’s business the Millennium was an important fillip, as companies commissioned social programmes, sponsorship and engagement: “Post the anti-capitalist movement of the early nineties business found its voice to persuade people it played a very positive role in society. But...the Millennium was a blip and what happened was whenever companies saw big and ambitious and exciting ways of expressing that purpose they ran away from it and that’s because
they as a group of Directors really were not confident that their business was being run responsibly and truth was they didn’t know...We did the first social report for McDonalds back in 2000 out of McLibel where they realised that whether they liked it or not they needed to be clearer about the way they ran their business...In order to be more confident as a business about being proud of what you do and [...] your role in society you need to measure your social and environmental performance, in order to manage it, in order for you to feel comfortable in doing exciting game changing things [...] and using it in your communication.”

‘Jim’ CEO Sustainability and Ethical Communications Agency (K1-12)

As editor of the University student paper, in 1990 Jim started a design agency from the Student Union’s trading arm, and took the production of the paper in house: “got to design and create campaigns and started taking on commercial clients”. After university he got a job as a campaigner for an animal welfare charity, becoming Campaign Director (and supplementing his low income with freelance journalism). Jim wanted to take the charity’s communications in different directions from the “shock horror... vernacular”, pushing the design element: “I wanted to use sex a lot more, I wanted to use humour”. His campaigns won prestigious Design & Art Direction awards, but also drew the ire of the Charity Commission for ‘political campaigning’. In 1998 he left for a new regional sustainability think-tank and became “deeply involved in wider sustainability issues, scenarios planning, regional development...did the first regional climate change impact study”. In 2002 he started an agency: “Three of us in a room, then took on a designer, moved from ‘PR plus’ to design as well. Doubled in size every year for the first four years. Portfolio was: renewables, climate change, regeneration, sustainability, recycling and waste campaigns, mainly for the public and third sector. We were very conscious of being a sustainability comms agency”.

These vignettes stress the varied discursive terrain of the field. Quentin’s account clearly resonates with neoliberal discourse and positions sustainability communications as engaging with a project of governmentality (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2000; Miller and Rose, 2008). Much more common in the emerging field were the positions of David and Jim, for whom sustainability communications was an extension of a critical ecological project, combining environmental and social ends. All three, however, show an entangling of economic and normative logics. In Quentin’s account a normative corporate project is the enabling foundation for an extension of brand management; equally in his account the logic of brand management is mobilised for normative ends. Both David and Jim’s accounts are also of market building and of extending the professional jurisdiction of commercial
communications practice into the novel areas thus opened up. For David and Jim, these projects segue economic and political ends.

The vignettes also illustrate the tangle of practices which make up the field. David’s reference to the “desk top publishing revolution” reminds us of the material infrastructure that is essential for the coordination of these practices. David and Quentin’s accounts illustrate the important role played by the development of CSR reporting in the emergence of the agency market. As CSR reporting developed, procedures of assurance and standards emerged, as we see with David’s piloting of the Global Reporting Initiative guidelines (to which over 1500 major organisations worldwide today adhere) (GRI, 2010).

However, as the example of Jim’s agency demonstrates, by no means all sustainability communications involved CSR – creative communications and campaigns are other poles to the field, drawing on resources of brand marketing, social marketing and NGO campaigns. CSR reporting entailed the emergence of new practices (such as environmental auditing) and the tight coordination of a wide range of technical, management and communication practices into the reporting project. The novelty of creative sustainability communications, on the other hand, lay in a bundling together of existing practices (e.g. graphic design, branding) and an incorporation into those practices of new repertoires of meaning (Shove, 2010) (e.g. ecology, social justice, corporate responsibility) and sustainability-related knowledges (e.g. carbon footprinting), creating new semantic spaces, or spaces of intelligibility (Schatzki, 2005: 470). In Schatzki’s (1996, 2002) terms, the teleoafffective structure of these practices was revolutionised as they were recruited to the normative project of sustainability communications. Thus a normative end was added to and foregrounded in these commercial communication practices, complementing their existing aesthetic ends and competing with, and in some cases displacing, their economic ends in the hierarchical ordering of their teleologies.  

It is also worth noting that the competencies of even a self-consciously sustainability communications agency were not restricted to sustainability per se, including here the regeneration field. Indeed Jim’s agency would go on, while maintaining its sustainability focus, to develop

---

66 This is of course not to say that the framing of communication practices within a normative project is in itself a novelty. A cursory knowledge of the history of art and design demonstrates numerous examples of the organised allegiance of aesthetic practices and political projects. Soviet Agitprop is an obvious example of an integrated bundling of communication practices for normative ends. Furthermore, the history of marketing and public relations is intimately bound up with that of political communication (see Mayhew, 1997). In Section 10.2 I look at previous ethical projects of commercial communications.
specialisms in other ‘issue’ fields, such as social enterprise and health communications. This is an important point to note because it adds a caveat to our account of a coalescing practice complex, drawing our attention to continuing processes of hybridisation and flux of practice elements.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how a novel complex of practices drawn from branding, CSR, social marketing and NGO campaigning that became known as sustainability communications emerged within the historical contexts mapped out in the previous chapter. I suggest that a relatively small group of pioneers were of central importance in its emergence, and in the development of the agency market specifically. While a discourse of critical ecology was common to many of the pioneers, the field accommodated quite diverse discursive positions, bound to a more or less common project through the inherent normativity of sustainability. A defining feature of the new practice complex was the combination of this normative project with a marketing-orientated approach to communication.

In the following chapter an account is provided of the contemporary agency market that has developed out of the processes described here, and a particular form of cultural intermediation that it performs, drawing upon its normative orientation, and upon which it bases an important element of its professional jurisdiction.
Chapter Six: The Sustainability Communications Agency Market

“Communications will make sustainable development a reality.” United Nations Environment Programme/Futerra (2005: 6)

“Sustainability communications bangs a slightly different shaped drum to the mainstream.” Head of Sustainability, Corporate Communications Consultancy (KI-11)

“Sustainability communications is like teenage sex – everybody says they’re doing it, but in reality hardly anyone is, and those that are are doing it badly.” Ed Gillespie, Creative Director, Futerra Communications

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide a sketch of the contemporary sustainability communications agency market. I examine the organisational structure of the market and the typical services agencies provide, and note the flow of personnel between the market and the NGO sphere. I go on to discuss a central defining feature of those services, which I characterise as the management of the ‘strategic ambiguity’ of sustainability. I argue that the normative orientation of the sustainability communications practice complex legitimates this management role to the emergent coalition established around the discourse of sustainability (Wexler, 2009). Furthermore, commitment to this strategic ambiguity by actors within the commercial sustainability communications field is shown within a controversy amongst the wider sustainability communications field around the role of values in communication, and the presumed ‘values-agnostic’ orientation of the social marketing approach.

6.2 The Structure of the Market

As an emerging field, sustainability communications lacks a professional organisation in the UK which might collate statistics on its size and composition.\textsuperscript{67} Nor do any of the interest groups

\textsuperscript{67} Neither the Association of Sustainability Practitioners (www.asp-online.org) nor the Global Association of Corporate Sustainability Officers (www.gacso.org) has a specific emphasis on communications.
representing the commercial communications professions in the UK produce such information. Assessing the size and composition of the field is complicated by it straddling more established professional fields - CSR, commercial communications and management consultancy. It is a hybrid field with at one end creative communications and at the other sustainability reporting. The agency market consists of both independent agencies and dedicated units in the major communications groups, as well as CSR and sustainability consultancies with communications service offerings. It is not uncommon for CSR consultancies whose core competencies may be, for example, auditing and corporate governance to also offer reporting services. Similarly firms which position themselves primarily as sustainability strategy consultants may offer communications services, and mainstream management consultancies may offer specialist sustainability services, including communications. A further complication is that mainstream advertising and marketing agencies may produce work that would be generally recognised as sustainability communications.

Thus in the wider CSR and sustainability consultancy market firms may offer communication services, or may stick to other core competencies, often subcontracting to or working in partnership with dedicated communication agencies, as illustrated in Figure 4 below. By ‘Sustainability Services Consultancies’ I refer to firms such as Arup, which have core technical skills (e.g. industrial design, engineering, architecture) from which they have moved into the sustainability space.

---

68 The various professional bodies representing advertising, marketing and public relations in the UK appear to have little interest in treating sustainability communications as a field in its own right, with the exception of the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM), which offers training in sustainability communications (CIM, 2012). CIM has had a concern with sustainability since at least 2001 when it commissioned an inquiry into the issues (Beckett et al., 2001). The Marketing Society’s annual awards have, since 2008, contained a category for ‘Ethical Marketing’ which morphed into ‘Marketing for Sustainable Consumption’ in 2011 but is otherwise uninvolved (Marketing Society, 2012).
A quantitative study of the market is beyond the scope of the present research. However, a mapping exercise of the UK sustainability communications agency market was conducted, recording 102 firms with a core service offering in sustainability or CSR communications. This is a representative rather than an exhaustive sample but allows some key features of the market to be ascertained.

The hybrid market is part of three wider markets, each with different structures – the design, advertising, and CSR consultancy markets. A full service sustainability communications agency would come under the Design Council’s definition of a “design agency” – however a CSR communications consultancy that outsourced visual design elements would not. Three quarters of design consultancies working in communications design employ fewer than five designers, all but 4% employ fewer than ten and only 1% over fifty (Design Council, 2010). The advertising, marketing and public relations industry, on the other hand, is characterised both by concentration and fragmentation – as small-scale boutique agencies spin off from, or are acquired by, the six international commercial communications conglomerates that account for around 60% of global advertising revenue. WPP, the largest, employs around 100,000 worldwide (Deuze, 2007). The CSR consultancy market on the other hand consists of the big four auditor firms, a layer of mid size firms and large number of smaller consultancies (Young et al., 2003).

Until around 2008 the market consisted almost entirely of a relatively small number of pioneering firms generally either specialising in CSR communications on the one hand or creative communications and social marketing on the other. The majority of these were small agencies, typically employing no more than ten to twenty people and were almost all founded after 2002. A

---

**Fig. 4. Overlapping practice sets amongst organisations in the consultancy market**
small number of older, larger firms pre-dating the market became involved from existing areas of expertise. For example, Fishburn Hedges, a PR firm currently employing 160, which was founded in 1991, entered the market after acting as PR agency for Shell at the time of its landmark 1998 CSR report, and now offers its key services in “Corporate and Brand Reputation, Sustainability and Behaviour Change” (Fishburn Hedges, 2012). Over the decade there has been considerable hybridisation between the corporate communications and creative communications poles. For example Corporate Edge, founded in 1982, a brand communications agency, acquired C21—an early CSR reporting consultancy—in 2002 (KI-4). Radley Yeldar, a corporate communications agency founded in 1986, moved into CSR reporting as the market developed and now positions itself as a “creative communications business” offering services in “Brand, Corporate Reporting, Employee Engagement, Sustainability and Marketing Communications” (Radley Yeldar, 2012).

The market now consists of, firstly, a large number of small agencies, typically employing less than twenty people, ranging from ‘full service’ agencies offering a full suite of marketing and communications services, to CSR reporting specialists and agencies specialising in specific communications practices, such as, for example, Nice & Serious, which makes “films, animations and interactive media that help our clients communicate sustainability” (Nice & Serious, 2012). Secondly, there is a smaller layer of mid size firms, with employees in the hundreds, for which sustainability communications are part of a broader range of services, typically, branding, public relations and corporate communications. Thirdly, there are global consulting firms, such as KPMG and Accenture which now offer a range of sustainability services, including CSR reporting.

Over the last five years the big six communications groups have taken a presence in the market. Thus, Saatchi & Saatchi (part of Publicis Groupe) launched its own dedicated sustainability division, Saatchi & Saatchi S, in 2008 (PR Newswire, 2008). In the same year, Aegis Media acquired Clownfish, a UK full service sustainability communications agency founded in 2004 (Media Week, 2008). The international Ogilvy Mathers group (itself part of WPP) launched OgilvyEarth in 2009 (Ogilvy, 2011). Omnicom Group companies Cone Communications and Ketchum offer corporate sustainability communications services (Cone Inc, 2010; Ketchum, 2012). In 2012 Edelman, the world’s largest public relations firm, launched its eighth ‘Global Practice’ division—“Business + Social Purpose”—offering services that include: “brand and corporate citizenship strategy and initiatives, CSR strategic planning, programming and reporting, reputation and issues management, public affairs, environmental sustainability, employee engagement, strategic philanthropy, cause–related marketing, public-private partnership development, NGO positioning, engagement and fundraising, and digital engagement” (PR Newswire, 2012).
The head of Saatchi & Saatchi S, Adam Werbach, is a former president of the Sierra Club, the largest environmental group in the US, and a former Greenpeace board member. This is probably the highest profile example of a feature of the field that has continued since its inception – the transfer of personnel between the NGO sphere and commercial sustainability communications. A recent survey found 14% working for consultancies servicing the corporate market had moved into their current job from the NGO or charity sector (Acre et al., 2010: 14). Of the fourteen of my key informants working in commercial sustainability communications six had at one time or another worked within the NGO sphere, while another currently ran a not-for-profit organisation that specialised in providing sustainability employee engagement and behaviour change programmes to business. Similarly, about a quarter of those working in the agency where I undertook my fieldwork had worked in the NGO sector. This personnel transfer continues the cross pollination in expertise and ethos between NGO campaigning, social marketing and commercial communications that was characteristic of the inception of the field.

This blurring of boundaries between commercial and not-for-profit sectors is also found in the client rosters of sustainability communications agencies, which typically undertake work for commercial, not-for-profit and public sector clients. Some, such as the agency studied during my fieldwork, charge different rates for different sectors; in this case a scale between for-profit, not-for-profit and ‘grassroots’ (e.g. small community organisations or activist groups). There is a spectrum between those agencies working almost exclusively in the corporate sector, on CSR, and those working almost exclusively in the not-for-profit sector. At one end of the spectrum we would find, for example, SalterBaxter, a major Europe-wide agency, with almost exclusively commercial clients; but which also prominently include in their client list the Courtauld Institute of Art and “cultural heritage portal” Europeana (SalterBaxter, 2011). At the other end of spectrum, Forster Communications’ client roster includes organisations such as: the National Trust, Amnesty International, NHS Tower Hamlets, and multi-stakeholder social marketing campaigns; as well as industry association the British Wind Energy Association, a solar energy company (for whom it “manages consumer PR”) and the Vodafone Foundation, a corporate CSR programme (Forster Communications, 2011b).

For most practitioners it is self evident that they practice something called “sustainability communications” as well as whatever specific practices (e.g. graphic design) they have expertise in. Some do however reject the definition, either as part of rejecting the idea that it should be a specialism, rather than an inherent part of commercial communications, or in favour of another, more specialised designation of which they claim expertise, such as “green marketing”. For still others the designation is just of limited interest. The public relations specialist in the agency where I
conducted my fieldwork simply saw himself as working in ‘PR’. He was a former music journalist, and his remit in the agency tended to involve promoting cultural events and institutions, as it always had in his PR career. “I used to work for a normal PR agency,” he commented, “they’re pretty horrible really - it’s much nicer here.”

Views of the wider commercial communications field varied considerably amongst my key informants, generally predictably in respect of the practitioner’s own relation to it. Thus a former Global Strategic Marketing Director at one of the top international communications groups relayed a mood in the wider industry of rapidly escalating interest in sustainability communications:

“You know …we used to say [in the Group], if we can get out of bed in the morning to shift how-ever-may-million bottles of Toilet Duck imagine what we could do if we actually cared about what we were trying to communicate. I think there are a lot of people in agencies that feel that way…You know there’s this unmet, er, this frustration brewing in most agencies. This could be a great moment for agencies…to re-engage with clients in quite a profound way, and…actually make their businesses more valuable. If you’re not on-side with this one day you’re going to find yourself at the wrong end of the plank you’re sawing through.” (KI-7)

This contrasts with the less generous views of some of my informants on the unreconstructed nature of the mainstream industry. Several noted words to the effect that most of the industry just “don’t get it”:

“PR agencies struggle with [sustainability communications]. They just don’t get the mind set.” (KI-1)

One former Saatchi & Saatchi board executive, now CEO of an “ethical marketing agency” likened mainstream commercial communications to “gangsters who have killed so many people they’ve just forgotten that what they’re doing is wrong” (KI-15). Noticeable in all these accounts is that the relations between sustainability communications as a specialist field and mainstream communications were routinely expressed in normative terms.

6.3 What Sustainability Communications Agencies Do

As we have seen, ‘design agencies’ and ‘corporate identity agencies’ emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, designating a novel focus on the purposive design of organisational identity and a synchronisation of design practices, from the visual to those of ‘corporate culture’. The 1990s saw
this expertise come under the purview of branding and the ‘brand agency’. The term
‘communications agency’, which began to appear in the 2000s, while commonly used synonymously
with ‘marketing agency’, signals in crucial ways a departure from marketing discourse. As formulated
by Philip Kotler since the late 1960s in the most widely used marketing text books, such as
Marketing Management (1984), the core principle of marketing is that a business should be
organised around meeting the needs and wants of the customer. Marketing was the outwardly
focused business function helping the firm understand and navigate its proper environment, the
market. The communications agency, by contrast, addressed an expanded environment defined by
stakeholders, both internal and external, and orientated to a mediatised cultural environment in
which ‘strategy’ and ‘communications’ were increasingly inseparable.

Thus in Communicating Sustainability, a 2005 document produced by UK sustainability
communication firm Futerra for the UN Environmental Programme and addressed to public
authorities, it is suggested that expert advice be sought:

“A communications agency can help with:

• Strategy development
• Market research
• Media management
• Web communications
• Creative work, such as publication design and production” (UNEP, 2005: 22)

Surveying the service offerings of firms in the sustainability communications market produced the
following list, presented in order of the most frequently made service offerings.

• CSR reporting—developing and producing corporate sustainability reports (including, inter
  alia: issues analysis; ‘materiality’ assessment; and consultancy on management systems)

• Branding and brand management—developing branded initiatives or sustainability sub-
  brands and integrating sustainability issues into existing brands

• Internal organisational communications—employee engagement and behaviour change
  programmes, in house publications, promotional literature, intranet sites

• Sustainability strategy development

• Communications strategy development
• External communications to multiple audiences (e.g. “Targeted communications to opinion formers”), including marketing and advertising to consumers, social marketing and behaviour change campaigns

• Event co-ordination and facilitation—conferences, promotional events, workshops

• Design—graphic design, web design, ‘visual identity’

• Stakeholder engagement and management

• Public and media relations

• Producing research papers—commonly on best practice, sectoral reviews, competitor and comparator analysis

• Policy and regulatory consultancy

• Benchmarking and competitor analysis

• Training—on sustainability per se and on many of the above practices

What is immediately apparent is that the audience for sustainability communications is more often than not the employee, rather than the consumer. Employees are often cited as the primary audience for corporate sustainability communications (e.g. Coulson, 2008) and sustainability communications more generally are far less commonly directed to audiences constructed as ‘consumers’ than to other groups.

One former Head of Brand Strategy for a blue chip UK company (KI-3) made the point that while he was unable to convince the retail division of the company to accept any ‘green’ product marketing, the company conducted extensive internal sustainability communications; including an environmental engagement programme and even focus groups with employees on the effectiveness of internal environmental messaging. Another branding executive shared an internal document discussing how the company’s “approach to CSR could fit with and support our brand positioning”. The paper presented research showing that CSR was of limited interest to customers but taken very seriously by staff, as well as a hierarchy of audience types with the least relevant category being “consumers”.

In Figure 5 below I illustrate client relationships observed through mapping the agency market. Sustainability communications agencies provide specialist services to mainstream communications
agencies and NGOs, but equally sustainability communications agencies may commission their communication services as part of work for third parties.

Fig. 5 Client relationships in the sustainability communications agency market (source: the author)

6.4 Managing Strategic Ambiguity

As is routinely acknowledged, the notion of sustainability as it is deployed in everyday discourse is deeply ambiguous, standing both for the sustaining of current conditions and the more or less radical critique and departure from current conditions. Indeed it is not uncommon to encounter
conflations between the financial sustainability of firms and the discourse of sustainability. At the same time all discourses of sustainability are inherently normative. As Amsler puts it, “declarations of unsustainability communicate normative judgments about the legitimacy of existing material conditions as well as assessments of the urgency of maintaining or transforming them” (2009: 114).

Influential consultant John Elkington articulates these two points in an optimistic view of corporate sustainability:

“It may seem strange to link the concept of sustainability with transformational change, when many of the business leaders who have signed up for what many dub “the sustainability journey” see the main goal as protecting and conserving things—be they ecosystems...or indigenous cultures. But the fact is that the current economic order is not only socially inequitable but also environmentally unsustainable. So whatever many business leaders thought they were signing up for, sustainability, increasingly, is likely to be an agenda of transformative—and often disruptive—change.” (Elkington, 2011)

Wexler (2009) suggests that the polyvalence within the discourse of the “triple bottom line” (economic, social, environmental)—which John Elkington introduced (1998, 1999) and was institutionalised in the practice of CSR reporting—amounts to an enabling “strategic ambiguity” through which loosely coupled discourse communities were able to form an emergent coalition. Strategic ambiguity “creates the condition for an emergent coalition when each party sees that they can gain from their membership in the coalition” and coalesce in negotiating conventions in order to accommodate one another’s goals (Wexler, 2009: 68-9).

The three discourse communities which formed this coalition can be characterised by placing value on, respectively: economic rationality; social rationality; and ecological rationality. For “triple bottom line” here we can read ‘corporate sustainability’. For the first group sustainability is therefore structured around risk and opportunity (each of which is located in the social and environmental

---

69 E.g. Professor M.E. King, Chairman of the Global Reporting Initiative, introduced the launch of the Integrated Reporting coalition thus: “To make our economy sustainable we have to re-learn everything we have learnt from the past...Integrated Reporting...equip[s] companies to strategically manage their operations, brand and reputation to stakeholders and be better prepared to manage any risk that may compromise the long-term sustainability of the business.” (IIRC, 2010).

At a roundtable event I attended, the Head of Sustainability for a UK company commented with exasperation, “Most of the NGOs won’t even talk to us! How can I implement sustainability when they’re undermining the sustainability of the company?” provoking a sharp rebuke from a CSR consultant present: “Sustainability is not about the financial sustainability of your firm!”
realms of which the other constituencies are advocates). The second group seeks to ameliorate the social conditions imposed by globalised, neoliberal capitalism. The third locates ecological rationality as the arbiter of key decisions to be made by agents of the contemporary organisation. Wexler suggests:

“The popularity of the term is due less to its technical merit, conciseness or even applicability in the field. Its rapid spread...is due to the ill-formed yet highly promise-laden manner in which [it] is framed as a silver bullet” (Wexler, 2009: 67).

The emergent coalition is agonistic in its relations but nevertheless each side has enough invested in the institutionalised practices that relate to the discourse—CSR reporting, environmental management systems, labour standards and audits in supply chains, etc—to stay within the coalition. While there are always those following ecological and social logics at the edges of the coalition ready to accuse their allies-in-logic of co-optation, there are also those radical elements prepared to consider that this symbolic ambiguity is a productive space of possibility rather than an empirical limitation (Amsler, 2009: 125).

I suggest that a defining feature of the contemporary sustainability communications agency field is to engage in processes of managing this strategic ambiguity and effectively to act as an interface or negotiator between the discourse communities of the emergent coalition (see Crane, 2000a). As one Head of Sustainability at a corporate communication consultancy put it:

“I guess sustainability communications is an interface between hard core capitalism and NGOs to an extent.” (KI-11)

One obvious sense in which it does this is in policing the limits of that ambiguity—by policing what is and what is not acceptable in sustainability communications; thus the importance of the commitment to the notion of “transparency” in sustainability communications. A senior CSR communications consultant notes:

“I think most companies have realised it’s got to be not just PR...If you’re going to produce these kind of communications and just treat it as PR nobody’s going to take it seriously, it’s a waste of time and money. I think most of our clients realise they’ve got to be objective as they can...A few years ago Sainsbury’s decided they were going to do quarterly sustainability reporting, and they did it in the same mode as their quarterly business reporting and it was just every positive thing you could think of. In the sustainability communications sense it was just nonsense.” (KI-1)
While the wider field of sustainability communications, including NGOs and corporates, most of which are party to the emergent coalition, partakes of this enterprise, the relative autonomy of the agency field places it in a central role as ‘honest broker’ in such policing. Another consultant commented:

“As much as I have a reputation, I think it’s around being a bit of an activist and advocate for honest and transparent communications...The people who want flim flam greenwash don’t come to me. I’m sure that world exists. I’ve had one or two projects where I was appalled at what was happening and I walked away from them.” (KI-4)

The normative commitments of many individuals and organisations within the market are thus less problematic than enabling to corporate actors, even where those commitments are to discursive positions quite different to those of a sustainability discourse subordinated to an economic logic, to which those corporate actors subscribe.

At its simplest this amounts to managing the problem of accusations of ‘greenwash’ and reputational damage; effectively pre-empting the potential challenges of civil society organisations, not in the manipulative sense of public relations, but through developing an inherently normative project of sustainability communications. Greenwash, in simple terms, is the antithesis of sustainability communications.

Indeed media attention in the Anglophone world to the issue of greenwash rose to a crescendo in the later 2000s with a series of high profile cases of botched corporate environmental communication at just the point that the agency market began growing rapidly—and the major communication groups turned their attention to sustainability communications. In 2008 Futerra Communications published a widely read white paper—the Greenwash Guide—which noted UK newspaper coverage using the term had accelerated from thirty mentions in 2005 to 130 in 2007, the year prior to publication (Futerra 2008: 10). The UK Advertising Standards Authority reported that complaints about environmental claims more than doubled in 2007 on the previous year (ASA, 2007), and the head of the ASA committed the body to a “more proactive” stance on the issue (Welch, 2008). Chris Arnold (one of my key informants), commented around the time in his Ethical Marketing blog on the influential Brand Republic website: “Marketing departments are coming under increasing pressure to not damage the company reputation with short term greenwash

---

70 The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines greenwash as: “Disinformation disseminated by an organisation to present an environmentally responsible public image.”
campaigns” (Arnold, 2008). Industry journal Adweek cautioned "greenwashing has become a household word” (Dolliver, 2008) and market research firm Nielsen Online concluded that greenwashing was a “failed corporate strategy” (quoted in Stauber, 2008). Indeed speaking at a conference on ‘Green Marketing’ in 2008 I found the common conversation of the mainstream marketing practitioner audience how to resist ill informed pressure from other parts of the business to engage in inappropriate sustainability communications.

Fig. 6 Shell advert censured by the ASA in 2007 in a highly publicised case of ‘greenwash’ Source: Treehugger.com

A more subtle role played by agencies in managing strategic ambiguity is to negotiate the strategic and instrumental goals of discourse communities and organisations within the emergent coalition within the fuzzy boundaries of the strategic ambiguity of sustainability. A CSR reporting consultant comments thus:

“There are often tensions because what you’re producing is a corporate communication, it isn’t an independent review and like any corporate document they find it difficult to include anything negative and in some cases it can be completely contrary to corporate message, so that’s not going to happen. But normally we would work very hard to persuade them that it’s actually in their longer term interests due to transparency etc to acknowledge these issues even if they’re not to say quite so openly as we’d like them to.” (KI- 1)
Here we see the consultant effectively acting as an advocate on the behalf of the non-economic logics of the coalition. This consultant, who had been in the business since its inception, went on to note that whilst in the “early days [it] was very common” for companies to withhold communication about “issues which are just too sensitive” this had changed over time.

The management of strategic ambiguity extends beyond relations with corporate sustainability however. This is best illustrated through an ongoing controversy in the wider field of sustainability communications between, on the one hand, Common Cause—a coalition of NGO sustainability communications specialists—and on the other hand, influential consultancy Cultural Dynamics Strategy and Marketing, Futerra Communications, and commercial sustainability communications agencies more generally.

Common Cause developed out of WWF-UK’s ‘Strategies for Change Project’, which brought together campaigners and communication specialists to address the challenge to the relevance of environmental NGOs in the context of commercial and public sustainability communications. The project produced an influential critique (Alexander et al, 2011; Crompton, 2007; Crompton, 2010; see also Crompton and Thogersen, 2009; CCCAG, 2010) of what was taken to be a consensus around a social marketing approach to behaviour change and sustainability communications based on consumer research, which suggested “the need for pro-environmental behaviours to fit within people’s current lifestyle, even if one might aim for more fundamental shifts over the longer term” (DEFRA, 2008 quoted in CCCAG, 2010). The Common Cause group went on to equate incrementalist policy objectives of marginal lifestyle change and commercial sustainability communications more broadly. They argued that the instrumentalist marketing based approach both represented a retreat from engaging with, and questioning of, dominant values, and moreover ignored the danger that specific campaigns serve to strengthen cultural values antithetical to large scale pro-environmental behaviour change.

Common Cause’s social psychology-based alternative approach, on the other hand, aims to use communications to foster allegedly pro-environmental “intrinsic values” and displace consumerist “extrinsic values”. ⁷¹ The deeply problematic nature of this project from a practice theory perspective barely needs mentioning. Commercial sustainability communications, on the other hand, takes as a central tenet that values-based communications are both generally inappropriate and usually ineffective. A somewhat vitriolic series of exchanges has developed between the two

⁷¹ See http://valuesandframes.org/
camps and the debate is widely known within the field. The point I would like to make is that this ‘values-agnostic’ approach to the content of communications is part of a sustainability communications practice the teleoaffactive structure of which is often strongly normatively oriented around discourses of political ecology and social justice. Practitioners often have a strong commitment to sustainability communications as a normative project. From this position the explicitly values-focused Common Cause approach to communications risks contravening the strategic ambiguity of sustainability upon which the success of that normative project depends.

6.5 Discursive Dynamics of the Field

As has already been signalled, the field contains quite diverse discursive positions, suggesting allegiances to quite different ‘sustainabilities’. And as previously noted, sustainability is inherently normative. Moreover the claim to professional jurisdiction on the part of both sustainability communications and corporate sustainability is a claim to expertise in a more or less radical overhaul of current practices (admittedly on a very broad spectrum of what ‘radical’ means). Key informants presented quite varied political commitments, from one happy to align himself to the Conservative ‘Big Society’ idea to another keen to declare himself “vegan, republican, very left socialist”. More than one made the unsolicited point that they “were not an anti-capitalist”. Several invoked traditions of nineteenth century philanthropic welfarism, embodied in figures like William Lever, as evidence of the possibility of a more ethical capitalism. This variety of positions reflects the broad discursive possibilities of sustainability.

While not wanting to suggest the field is structured in an overly simple way, we can however see a discursive patterning between those organisations which define themselves in explicit positioning statements by normative orientations and those that frame themselves in an economic logic. So we find FEEL Communications offering this statement on a web page titled ‘Our Values’:

“We only build brands we like, support or would buy ourselves, which make a positive difference to the way we live.” (FEEL, 2012)

Or the mission statement of the agency where I conducted my fieldwork, which stated:

“A different type of agency, devoted to communicating sustainable development... a new type of agency...borne out of a belief that communications could change the world... We summarise our approach as: communications for a sustainable future.” (the Agency website, 01/08/2010)
Futura states “...we promote sustainable development”; and notes that the requirement that all the work that it undertakes should “promote sustainable development” is “even written...into our articles of association, so we are legally obliged to do it” (Futura, 2011).

On the other hand we find, for example, OgilvyEarth, which frames itself within an economic logic:

“OgilvyEarth is a global sustainability practice that helps brands harness the power of sustainability through innovative business thinking, strategic planning and communications. OgilvyEarth works with visionary companies that are looking to make sustainability a growth driver for both their business and the communities they serve.” (PR Newswire, 2012b)

If we expand the range to sustainability strategy consultancies we find almost ideal types, of ecological and economic rationality. For example, on the one hand we find business ‘social innovation’ consultancy VOLANS explicitly positioning itself within an ecological rationality and explicitly rejecting the idea of the “triple bottom line” as a balance between the three rationalities:

“Properly understood, sustainability is not the same as corporate social responsibility (CSR)—nor can it be reduced to achieving an acceptable balance across economic, social and environmental bottom lines. Instead, it is about the fundamental, intergenerational task of winding down the dysfunctional economic and business models of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the evolution of new ones fit for a human population headed towards nine billion people, living on a small planet which is already in ‘ecological overshoot’.” (Volans, 2011)

At the other end of the spectrum, firmly located within the discourse of economic rationality, we find the consultancy services firm Accenture; for whom social and ecological rationalities are entirely subsumed by the risks and opportunities of economic rationality:

“Accenture defines sustainability as the way a company or organization creates value for its shareholders and society by maximizing the positive and minimizing the negative effects on social, environmental and economic issues and stakeholders.” (Accenture, 2011a)
“Our research and experience suggest that a focus on sustainability not only promotes revenue growth, cost reductions, better risk management and a stronger brand, but also positions the company for high performance.” (Accenture, 2011b)

This view of the market as broadly divided between ‘values based’ organisations on the one hand and those driven by purely economic ends was widely shared by practitioners. It is worth noting that, when presented with such a characterisation, not all key informants thought of themselves as working for primarily ‘values based’ organisations. Furthermore, there is no simple equation between the discursive positioning of agencies and the commitments to different forms of sustainability of practitioners. Nor of course should we expect to find discursive coherence, as individuals negotiate the inherent normativity of sustainability. Thus the Head of Sustainability for a corporate communications agency pondered:

“It’s something I’ve been wrestling with really. Can an organisation on the scale of Unilever be sustainable whatever its commitments?” (KI-11)

Rather than equate this discursive pattern to a simple scale we should see it as suggesting variations in pattern between economic and normative teleological commitments.

6.6 Conclusion

The management of the strategic ambiguity of sustainability can be seen to be a central and defining characteristic of the sustainability communications complex as it is found in the agency market. This problematic suggests also the varied discursive field within the market, which as we saw in Chapter Five, contains enunciations of both ecological discourse and what could be characterised as neoliberal discourse. Despite this diversity I suggest that there is an observable axis in the market between those organisations in which the practice complex is more or less normatively oriented. In the following chapter I explore this normative project further and suggest it plays a fundamental role in integrating the practice complex.
Chapter Seven: Doing Sustainability Communications

7.1 Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis it was suggested that it is most analytically productive to approach commercial sustainability communications as a performative complex of practices; and that in order to understand its performativity we need to understand it as a more or less integrated complex, rather than simply its constituent practices. In Chapter Four and Five I looked at how this complex has come about and how part of it formed the agency and consultancy market. In Chapter Six I provided a sketch of the contemporary market and suggested some of its key features. In this chapter I draw on my fieldwork in a sustainability communications agency (and interview data more widely) to look at how the practices of sustainability communications are performed. This is not a detailed account of situated practice and it is not an ethnographic study of the total social world of people in the fieldwork firm. Rather I suggest that to approach the core issue of cultural intermediation we need to understand its performativity. Firstly, we must address how the performance of the practices integrates them into the practice complex, such that it can be said to have more or less coherent projects above the operation of its constituent practices. Secondly, we must address the complex’s practical performative efforts. In this chapter I provide a brief portrait of the fieldwork agency, address this first issue of the integration of the sustainability communications complex, and examine sustainability communications as a normative project. In the following chapter I address the second issue of the complex’s performativity.

7.2 Portrait of a Sustainability Communications Agency

Over a ten month period, in 2010-2011, I worked with a dedicated sustainability communications agency as a copywriter and researcher, working for usually two or three days a week in the agency’s offices. I will refer to the company pseudonymously as the Agency. I gained access to the Agency through the recommendation of a mutual acquaintance of the CEO. The CEO (KI-12) was enthusiastic about my PhD project and happy to facilitate the fieldwork. The CEO had deeply held political, environmental and ethical commitments, a penchant for cultural theory and a broad knowledge of sustainability issues. He welcomed the opportunity to facilitate a project that engaged with sustainable consumption, as well as which critically addressed issues to do with the business of communications.
During my time at the Agency I worked on, amongst other things: a CSR report for a commercial property company; a ‘pitch’ to a major logistics firm for work to produce a web-based sustainability initiative for the company; a communications plan for a proposed corporate cause-related marketing scheme; a presentation for a sustainability executive in a utility company; a climate change engagement plan for a county council; a campaign for a business school advertising a course on sustainability for middle managers; and a research project on an experimental farming project for an arts festival. Around me colleagues also worked beyond a sustainability remit on, amongst other things, visual design for an art gallery’s flagship exhibition, public relations for a museum of popular music and a television advertisement to recruit foster carers. The Agency, though it still defined itself as a sustainability communications agency had long since extended its remit to ‘issues’ generally and, more recently, the cultural sector. Indeed as recession and deep funding cuts for many clients loomed, the senior management had begun to actively develop this market, as well as looking for new commercial clients. The strategy was successful and at the time of writing the Agency had weathered the economic storm. It has developed its ‘cultural offer’ considerably, as well as becoming involved with (public sector) health communications, deepened its involvement with universities (both on sustainability related projects and university branding) and more recently become involved with international projects related to sustainability in the built environment. As my research focus was on both commercial sustainability communications generically and corporate sustainability specifically I tended to be involved with projects for commercial clients, although the Agency’s client roster was dominated by public and third sector clients.

The Agency occupies a particular position within the field of sustainability communications: that of a ‘values driven’ commercial agency with a strong public commitment to the principles of sustainable development. Given the recuperative position suggested of the discourse of sustainable development in Chapter Four it is worth clarifying that that positioning was relatively generic. Commonly held views in the Agency tended towards, if not avowedly anti-capitalist, a ‘strong’ version of the discourse of sustainability which would reject the compatibility of contemporary capitalism with ‘genuine’ sustainable development. This positioning within the contested discourse of sustainability is perhaps best summed up by the CEO’s inclusion as his standard email footer of a quotation from the US anarchist and radical environmentalist Edward Abbey: "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." If, to invoke my naïve starting point, cultural intermediaries potentially had the capacity to shape culture in their own likeness this seemed like a good place to look for my cultural intermediaries of sustainability.
This does however pose the question who or what is assumed to be the cultural intermediary? Whatever the amusing prescience in Bourdieu’s depiction of the new petit bourgeois, without accepting habitus as a causal agent, or a highly problematic notion of the actor, any sense of a class fraction as cultural intermediary must be rejected. Without rejecting individual agency, practice theory’s rejection of methodological individualism would suggest individuals and their attitudes could only offer limited purchase to the question. Practice-collectivities or “communities of practice”, networks of situated and distributed cognition (Lave and Wenger, 1991) with shared repertoires of meaning (Wenger, 1998) could better serve this role. The organisational actor—“an intentionally instituted and purpose-oriented configuration of interrelated human activities (or co-operation)” (Schatzki, 2011: 9; cf, 2005)—in as much as it could be shown to have pertinent shared repertoires of meaning, could therefore serve as a suitable object of analysis.

I have already suggested that sustainability communications can be considered a practice complex, a densely integrated set of practices, with certain general understandings that discursively inform a more or less normative teleology. To look at the level of the organisation, therefore, would be to look for some finer granularity within this practice complex. To examine it as a cultural intermediary would be to explore its capacity to shape cultural representations and perhaps carry particular practices or elements of practice into wider social space.

The Agency, based in the north of England, was founded in 2002 by the current CEO (KI-12) and Managing Director (KI-13), each of whom had by that point over a decade of experience working in various positions in communications. The CEO had previously founded a design agency and worked for a regional sustainable development think tank, in a strategy and communications role; the MD was trained as a TV producer, and had experience as communications manager of a mid-size third sector organisation. Both had previously run campaigns and communications for the same animal welfare charity.

The Agency employed between twenty and twenty two staff during the time of my fieldwork, as well as occasional freelancers for specialist work, such as photography, sculpture, and architectural consultancy, as well as to provide extra capacity at particularly busy periods. The Agency is a ‘full service agency’ – able to offer clients a full suite of services, including graphic design, video production, website development, public relations, branding, events co-ordination, strategic consultancy and marketing services. It can compete on size, skills and resources with all but the largest of the integrated communication agencies in the region.
The Agency is physically located in one of the regenerated inner city warehouse districts now synonymous with the ‘creative industries’. Explicitly promoted by the City Council as a ‘hub of the creative industries’, the area has, in the space of less than ten years, seen low-end garment industry outlets replaced by fashionable bars and coffee shops, and derelict buildings reincarnate into arts centres. Street drug users have been all but crowded off the pavements by fashionable twenty-something graphic designers. The converted warehouse building in which the Agency’s open-plan offices are located is virtually stereotypical: hosting a stable of small ‘creative industry’ and ‘knowledge intensive’ businesses (a fashion label, a ‘social research company’, a design agency, an environmental business consultancy) and third sector organisations (a ‘business support agency’, a ‘sustainable living’ charity), while the ground floor boasts a (Fairtrade) coffee shop, a tapas restaurant and a fashionable hairdressers.

The office is open plan, with Apple Mac covered desks arranged to loosely group business activities - the design team at one end of the room and account managers grouped centrally. It looks, as one of the graphic designers put it, “like a communications agency should”. The entrance area, where there are sofas and tables for meetings, is separated from the main work area by an open plan kitchen. This meeting area is lined with book shelves; topics range from marketing, branding and design to sustainability, social sciences and left wing and green politics. Ostensibly for reference, source material and inspiration, the bookshelves serve to demonstrate a sensibility of creativity, design-consciousness, and social and political engagement. The only closed areas of the office are the video-editing suite and the shower and changing room (cycling is given high status in the Agency and the facilities are intentionally designed to promote it as a sustainable practice by overcoming common behavioural barriers).

The books on the CEO’s desk rehearse the post ‘68 cultural co-ordinates and aestheticised consumer predilections of Bourdieu’s (1984) new petit bourgeoisie and advertise an intellectual and political sensibility. We find: Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*; Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*; Raymond Williams’ *Communication*; Adorno’s *Aesthetics and Politics*; Simon Anholt’s *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*; the World Watch Institute’s edited collection *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability*; an anthology of Situationist pamphlets; *Design Yearbook 2009: A Glimpse into Arup’s Creative World*; and the current issue of *Monocle*, a self-consciously cosmopolitan, high-gloss, monthly magazine.
with a strong emphasis on visual design, “covering international affairs, business, culture and design”.

The core services that the Agency was commissioned to perform can be broken down as: advertising; marketing; brand development; public relations; strategic consultancy; and research. The key constituent techniques that these call upon (in addition to multiple constituent and supporting practices) are: graphic design; website design and development; film production; writing (copy writing, report writing, journalism); and event co-ordination.

As previously signalled, the Agency’s rosta of clients was heavily skewed towards public and third sector bodies (e.g. councils, conservation groups, urban regeneration organisations) and, increasingly, cultural organisations (e.g. museums, art galleries). Far from being primarily restrictive the explicit ethical positioning of the Agency is regarded as being a key business strength. Commenting on the Agency’s cultivation of its client base in cultural organisations a senior account manager noted:

“... what’s interesting with the clients on that side is they quite welcome the specialism [...] so some of the briefs we’ve had from cultural people specify: ‘We have a strong commitment to sustainability and welcome applications from agencies that have a similar ethos’... we don’t have to be two different kinds of agency we can be very honest and say this is what we care about, this is what we passionately believe and it’s really kind of advantageous to have those credentials really...”

It is also worth highlighting that the Agency was commissioned for projects that might more easily be understood as social marketing. Through its long term engagement with regeneration projects the Agency had also developed a specialism in ‘place branding’ (or ‘destination branding’) – which, for example, might involve work to promote an area to tourists and visitors, or in the case of one of the Agency’s long term projects, to improve the image of an underprivileged area (both internally and externally). Appendix IV lists a representative sample of ‘active jobs’ (i.e. ongoing work activity) in a typical week at the Agency.

What this diverse client base represents is the way in which the Agency developed its own market through quite tightly interconnected regional networks of third sector organisations. The Managing Director gave an account of this development:

72 See www.monocle.com
“We were approaching organisations that weren’t used to dealing with comms agencies. We approached public agencies as one of them, we talked to them about what they were actually doing, not going in talking about comms and brands and stuff that just scared them. We used to have this briefing template we’d send out, for clients to give us a brief and we hardly ever got it back. They didn’t know what a brief was. We were leading them, we’d go back and say, well this is how you do comms. And the sustainability sector was very well networked so we just developed through that network.” (KI-13)

Indeed private sector clients tended to be recruited through regional and civic networks, such as public-private area partnerships. The significance of this market building is that it is quite different from that of, say Futerra in London. Futerra developed out of a year-long project funded by NESTA to explore how best to use communication techniques to communicate sustainability issues. The co-founders acquired BT as a client, which was looking to develop its sustainability communications. This ground led, on the one hand, to a number of grant funded projects promoting the notion of sustainability communications with bodies such as the UN Environment Programme, and on the other a series of high profile commercial clients. These differing paths suggest how geographical and spatial differences imprint and influence the local development of practices (see Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007).

7.3 The Sustainability Communications Practice Complex

As we saw in Section 4.2.1, writing in 1996, environmentalist Andrew Jamison regarded Greenpeace’s turn to the techniques of advertising with horror. Whilst couched in a wider critique of professionalization in the environmental movement, it was nevertheless the promotional and rhetorical techniques of advertising itself that compromised environmentalism: “framed... in such a way as to lend themselves to mass media advertising” the problems of environmental destruction were simplified, exaggerated, reduced to linear causality (Jamison, 1996: 236). The audience of these adverts were, Jamison avers, reduced to consumers, “urged to buy...the costly campaigning activities of Greenpeace” (ibid.). This view of “the dark arts of marketing and PR” (KI-4) was quite commonplace in the environmental movement of the time.

The CEO of the Agency, who had made in the 1980s a conscious decision not to exploit his eye for design and communication to “sell shit to sleepwalkers” remembers these Greenpeace adverts quite differently, as a new and exciting possibility of turning the ‘darks arts’ into a Trojan horse in consumer culture. What has happened between then and now is what allows us to talk about
sustainability communications as an entity. We have seen that CSR reporting represents a co-
ordination of some quite novel (e.g. writing a CSR report) and some repurposed practices (e.g. social
auditing). But what of creative sustainability communications? Is this area nothing more than
existing practices—graphic design, copywriting, etc.—dedicated to producing a new genre of
content: graphics of wind turbines and exhortations to turn the lights off? Through an analysis of
doing sustainability communications at the Agency, with additional input from key informants, I
isolate some components of practice that I suggest integrate creative sustainability communications,
together with CSR communications, into a distinct and novel form of commercial cultural
production.

7.3.1 Expert Knowledge Practices

Firstly, is there something specific to the character of expert practices as opposed to the routine,
mundane goings on of everyday life that practice theory often takes as its object? Knorr-Cetina
(2001) suggests that the tendency to emphasise “the habitual or rule-bound nature of practices”
may be misleading when it comes to those practices of organisations and occupations that have a
significant knowledge base and have to “continually reinvent their own practices of acquiring
knowledge” (2001: 175). These are the kind of practices which routinely, as it were, confront non-
routine problems and that therefore are “more internally differentiated” than conceptions of
practice as skills or habitual task performance (ibid). Knorr-Cetina suggests that a relational rather
than performative idiom is useful here. Knowledge practices are characterised by their relations to
“epistemic objects”, which possess an unfolding, iterative ontology. A computer program is the
perfect example: internally complex, characterised by “dynamic extendability” as a series of
iterations (ibid.: 187). This characterisation appears useful, especially in relation to practices such as
graphic or web design, which are inherently bound up with the skilful use of software, continual
iterations of which enable innovation and demand new competence. However, we should also note
that all competent performance of practice produces not repetition but improvisation, marshalling
understandings, competences and engagements that are to hand (Warde, 2005), and in this sense
epistemic practices perhaps simply exhibit an extension of this characteristic of practice.

Moreover, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) suggest that we should be cautious not to see expertise as
somehow at one end of a scale between the habitual on the one hand and the deliberative and
reflexive on the other. They suggest that, on the contrary, “intuitive judgment is the hallmark of
expertise” (2005: 779), such as medical practice, or playing chess. They distinguish levels of
expertise: “The proficient performer, immersed in the world of skilful activity, sees what needs to
be done, but *decides how to do it*” (ibid: 787). However, what distinguishes the expert is that “thanks to a vast repertoire of situational discriminations” built up from experience, they see immediately how to achieve the goal, without recourse to deliberation. Expertise cannot be captured in rule-based systems, they argue, since expertise is based on making unreflective situational responses. Experts certainly, at times, deliberate, but for the purpose of improving intuition (ibid. 779). Something un-reflexive is therefore actually central to the operation of expertise.

This nature of knowledge practice is neatly summed up by an experienced graphic designer at the Agency:

“You never get to a point where you think ‘That’s it, I know how to do it now’. You get to a point where you’re confident in your abilities, but there’s always new stuff to learn...Deciding on design itself, obviously I do research, about the organisation, and you look at comparable work, and innovations, and there are certain rules, like accessibility—and things like colour theory. But how do I decide? I don’t know. I’m not sure I’ve ever thought about it. I suppose you just make a judgement.”

### 7.3.2 What integrates Sustainability Communications Practices?

What integrates or co-ordinates the constituent practices of sustainability communications? Firstly we should acknowledge the banal point of co-location. The practices are largely located in the office, allowing understandings and procedures to circulate relatively easily. Secondly, and I suggest more importantly, almost all projects require the co-ordination of teams fielding core practices—copywriting, graphic design etc. This co-ordination by the account manager is itself a skilled practice of negotiating the needs of the client to the team, building the team, managing the inherent creative conflict of a project, protecting the client from that conflict and deploying various co-ordinating practices and devices (meetings, gant charts, even specialised software designed for scheduling professional communications projects). Indeed scheduling and co-ordination are critical to the successful temporal integration of practices needed to deliver a project.73

“More often than not in a creative agency people do not agree with each other...What you realise is that conflict is part of the struggle to get it right. I don’t mean being aggressive, I mean people will challenge and disagree... If you’re making this napkin, say,

---

73 For a practice account of complex co-ordination across a business organization, see Orlikowsky, 2002.
I’m sure there’s lots of decisions but the product is what it is, you’re affecting the processes to make it...But in a creative industry you’re conceiving something that didn’t exist.” (Managing Director, KI-13)

Teams are composed for each project depending on availability and the combination of practices required. These ad hoc, project based teams mean that practitioners of different communication practices must learn to co-ordinate around certain more or less shared procedures and general understandings in order for creative conflict to be successfully managed. These generic forms of organisational co-ordination therefore help anchor the novel elements of sustainability communications in the constituent practices.

I would suggest that what integrates creative sustainability communications is not knowledge about sustainability. Obviously knowledge about sustainability plays a role in sustainability communications but perhaps not an integrating one. Firstly, we should acknowledge the obvious point that such specialist knowledge has a very different relation to different kinds of practices within the complex. Knowledge about, for example, renewable energy, may play an important role in pitching for a project from a renewable energy company and have an essential role for a writer writing copy for that company’s website. But it plays a very different role for a designer designing the company’s website.

Integration does not occur at the level of practical understandings, in Schatzki’s sense (2002: 78) but at the level of rules (procedures, in Warde’s (2005) sense), teleoafffective structure and general understandings. There are two basic kinds of integrating elements—normative and instrumental.

The normative include, at the level of general understandings, the defining features of the discourse of sustainability that the genealogy in Chapter Four traced: a generic systems ecology understanding and a problematisation of consumption. These are part of a normative orientation which has more specificity to sustainability communications, discussed below.

The instrumental relate to a body of received wisdom about how to do sustainability communications effectively—whether that means to sell a product, attract support for a campaign or engage in behaviour change. These may take the form of axiom like rules that draw on both specialised knowledges, including academic knowledge (behaviour change being a good example) and the body of knowledge built up around commercial communications, both formally encoded in practitioner literature and informally in experience, as a kind of lore. As with any professional field there is an understanding of the field as a field and a growing body of specialist knowledge, including
knowledge of the body of work produced by the field. Thus much research involves researching what existing work there is and how it is considered.

Axioms, of course, require no knowledge of those origins for practical implementation. An example would be, having been asked to write a piece about climate change, linking the global problem to local conditions, as part of a county council’s energy saving initiative, the account manager enjoins: “You know: no fear without agency?”. This is a basic principle often invoked in one way or another in sustainability communications, drawing on bodies of motivational knowledge and practitioner experience.

Another widely shared rule-like element we might call ‘strategic purpose’:

“We find people talk about sustainability without a direct call to action. We’ve said: ‘What do you actually want to do with the communication?’ Which is where communications leads back directly to strategy.” (Head of Sustainability, corporate communication agency, KI-11)

While this is an element shared with commercial communications more widely, in the case of sustainability communications, especially corporate, it has a particular articulation to the complex’s lore: the long experience of failed and botched sustainability communications due to lack of strategic insight around mobilising sustainability as a resource. This is a procedure, therefore, which helps determine the appropriateness of projects, as well as acting to support sustainability communications’ jurisdictional claim over organisational strategy, which it competes over with other professions.

It also relates to a generalised understanding drawing on lore and codified knowledge—what has been termed the “sustainability liability”, or the potential for sustainability related messaging (especially consumer messaging) to backfire and create negative connotations. This is different from the problem of greenwash. Luchs et al (2010), from whom I borrow the term, refer to the implicit association of ethicality/sustainability with concepts such as “gentle” and “safe” and conversely its disassociation with concepts such as “strength” and “toughness”. I suggest the term in a wider sense.

At the end of the last chapter I referred to the controversy between the social marketing-based approach common to commercial sustainability communications, which I called ‘values agnostic’ and the Common Cause group’s call for an explicitly ‘values based’ approach. Again, this does not mean commercial sustainability communications lacks normative orientation nor that it never invokes
specific values. Rather it refers to an approach premised on crafting the communication to the audience and focused on the instrumental success of the communication. It also implies an understanding of social action not dissimilar to that of practice theory, as opposed to a social psychological understanding which posits values as motivating behaviour. This point is elaborated in Chapter Nine. This ‘values agnostic’ understanding is widely shared throughout the field and thus serves as a strongly integrating element. As one account manager put it:

“I think the role is to change behaviour – which is what marketing does. I think values can be changed but it’s a bigger societal issue, you can’t do it through comms alone. It’s a generational thing...and I think comms in the mean time will have to meet people where they are.”

7.3.3 An Object of Beauty

Before looking directly at normative orientations I want to suggest an ideal that integrates the normative and the instrumental. More than once during the course of my fieldwork I heard the CEO talk about the aim of a project to be to produce an “object of beauty” and over time it became clear that this ideal was part of a discourse woven into much of the practice of the agency. This design focus clearly reflected its founders’ aesthetic sensibilities and had developed into something of an ethos. The Creative Director suggested that what sustainability communication should be about was:

“Presenting things in a way that’s as attractive as possible, as sexy as Apple...there’s mass appeal when there’s appealing subject matter. It’s almost akin to making sustainability into a desirable product, making the issues into desirable consumables and stitching them into everyday life. Its understanding people’s needs, lifestyles and producing something beautiful for them.”

A junior account manager put it like this:

“I think the Agency is about communicating in a certain way [taking] things that people haven’t really bothered with, on small budgets that aren’t beautifully presented or well thought through. We don’t baulk at a small budget and try and do our very best to make things look beautiful. I think people [in the Agency] want to apply what they’ve learnt in our perhaps more shiny world and show you don’t have to be a dreadlocked hippy to be ethically driven. It opens people’s minds.”
She contrasted this attitude with the anarchist social centre where she had volunteered as a student:

“I loved that place, I’ve still got friends from there, but that can be quite intimidating to normal people, almost a subculture. Environmental issues should be part of everyone’s lives. People don’t want to think of themselves like that. I want to normalise it.”

This discourse of putting design to work to normalise sustainability was by no means unique to the Agency but the level of emphasis on achieving a fusion of aesthetic and ethical suggests how different organisations in the field display varied repertoires of meaning. The “object of beauty,” then, represented the ideal of achieving a harmonious integration of aesthetic, ethical and economic axes. The aesthetic was put to work for the ethical accomplishment of successfully engaging the normative project of sustainability communications within the economic constraints of markets and budgets.

7.4 The Normative Project of Sustainability Communications

“There’s a mindset around sustainability communications that’s about respecting, recognising, responding to all relevant stakeholders, which is somewhat apart from generic communications thinking. It comes from a different starting point.” Corporate Sustainability Consultant (KI-4)

The Agency’s website, and a ‘mission statement’ prominently situated on the wall of the company’s office, makes clear that the Agency (while a for-profit, privately owned business) regards its raison d’etre as to creatively use “communications” to forward the agenda of “sustainable development”. The company’s website explicitly refers to the Agency’s “ethical outlook”, its commitment to “promote the issues...we care about”, championing the role of “communications” to “change the world” and promote a “sustainable future”.

Indeed, for the CEO the field of sustainability communications is clearly divided between agencies with a commitment to ‘genuine’ sustainability and agencies that have recognised ‘sustainability’ as a new market opportunity:

“There are agencies that do sustainability...some really big ones. And there are agencies for whom it’s clearly core: Futerra, Forster. There are other agencies like Ogilvy who have clearly decided ‘here’s a market’. We are from the DNA upwards about that, it’s
very political and nobody ever hides it and nobody on the team ever has any doubts about what the political is.”

The Agency’s public commitments to an ‘ethical’ stance are to some degree facilitated by a client roster heavily skewed to public and ‘third sector’ organisations, rather than the corporate sector, where challenges to ethical conduct of clients (whether over supply chain scandals, environmental impact or financial controversies) —and by association, agencies—are more common.

That said, Toby Webb, a leading commentator on corporate sustainability, notes “…it seems to me that soon it will become untenable for big, sustainably-minded companies to continue to employ PR and lobbying firms, even (or particularly) on sustainability, who act for deeply unethical clients” (Webb, 2010). The sustainability and ethical record of clients may therefore itself be a selling point for sustainability communications agencies in certain markets.

While the Agency has no explicit policy regarding the credentials of prospective clients, work can be actively turned down due to prospective clients’ ethical orientations, even during the period of financial insecurity during which my fieldwork took place. During my tenure one prospective project was put on hold due to associated animal welfare considerations. The CEO recalled a potential new client (a nature conservation organisation) was turned down when it emerged the project concerned grouse-shooting. This latter case was cited to me as evidence that employees broadly share the Agency’s ethical and political commitments:

“Largely I think most people get it... you know my colleague didn’t need to check with me that anything to do with blood sports isn’t going to fit with this agency.”

Versions of the Manichean struggle between instrumental and communicative reason (e.g. Habermas, 1991) and of what Williams (2005) calls the “meta-narrative of commodification” are commonplace throughout critical and popular discourse. In relation to commercial communications specifically we find a widespread academic discourse concerning what Mayhew (1997) calls the “rationalisation of persuasion” and epochal characterisations of the relation of economy and culture such as Wernick’s (1991). The point I want to make here is that, just as Holt (2002) notes that in many senses the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industries has become a cultural commonsense through which contemporary eyes view advertising, so concerns over the proper place of promotion, norms of public discourse, and the instrumentality of economic practices are not restricted to academic thought. Rather they permeate the everyday discourse in which sustainability communications is enacted.
The tension between the instrumentalism of corporate promotion and the normative discourse of sustainability is not merely a background understanding to sustainability communications, in it lies part of its appeal to expertise. Furthermore, in its odd, hybrid territory between marketing and CSR it daily negotiates the boundaries between the communication of information and the rhetoric of persuasion. 74 This lived tension was made evident in a discussion with a brand manager responsible for overall ‘brand language’ for his firm (KI-10). He had, he said, spent years negotiating around the language of the company’s CSR report, which he considered turgid. “It took me three years to get the use of the first person signed off” he commented disparingly: “The problem is if I try to make it anything but bland they freak because they say it sounds like marketing.”

In a very real sense, the motivation for many at the creative end of sustainability communications, explicitly professed by the founders of the field, is the realisation of the limited efficacy of communication premised on an idea of communicative reason and the desire to mobilise the promotional and rhetorical to normative ends.

### 7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn on (principally) fieldwork to explore aspects of the performance of sustainability communications. I have shown how the practice complex is integrated through the circulation of novel elements among the constituent commercial communication practices. I have examined in a little more depth the normative project of sustainability communications, which is a defining feature of the complex, and discussed some of the ways in which local contexts of geography and social networks condition the development of practices.

In the following chapter I provide an account of the major project undertaken during my fieldwork—the writing of a CSR report—and explore how practitioners seek to further the normative project by diffusing practices and understandings of sustainability.

---

74 While the tension is peculiarly fore-grounded in sustainability communications this tension has always been at the heart of widespread cultural unease about the nature of marketing and advertising (see Slater, 2011)
Chapter Eight: Doing Sustainability Communications II  
Writing a Sustainability Report

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I draw on fieldwork material to present a narrative account of doing sustainability communications. The Agency was commissioned by a commercial property company, which I refer to as Northlands, to write its first CSR or sustainability report. This was by far the largest project that was undertaken during my fieldwork. Examining the process illustrates important features of the performance of sustainability communications – the kinds of knowledge marshalled and the constraints and negotiations of cultural production. The account also demonstrates an important form of cultural intermediation whereby practitioners translate, or attempt to translate, practices and components of practices into new environments. In the context of CSR reporting such processes of diffusion (of both brand and CSR practices) can be seen as resulting in institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In Section 4.3 we saw the origins of the institutionalisation of CSR in “coercive isomorphism” caused by exogenous pressures, here we witness mimetic and normative processes of homogenisation coming to the fore (ibid.).

8.2 Northlands

Northlands is privately owned and family led, with two generations in the key executive roles. Reporting in 2009 the company’s portfolio was worth around £900m (some 30% down on pre-financial crisis value), with a turnover of around £95m and pre-tax profits of about £12.5m; both turnover and profit had continued to grow strongly through the financial crisis and property bubble collapse.

With buildings in many of the conurbations of northern England, the mainstay of the company’s portfolio of around 100 buildings is commercial office space. Much of its portfolio is located in city centres. Indeed the density of ownership of city centre buildings by Northlands is such that the company has come to play a significant role in civic governance, through its involvement in public-private sector ‘area partnerships’, and its role in wider regeneration projects, its investment in public space, its importance in city regional economies and its not insubstantial philanthropy and sponsorship of civic culture. It was through these engagements that the Agency had come to work with Northlands.
The Agency had already done work for Northlands over the past couple of years, such as a leaflet promoting company’s environment schemes. A subsequent commission to advise on the company’s sustainability strategy had led to the commission to produce the Sustainability Report, as well as a much smaller project to promote a company cycling scheme.

Northlands, as a family owned business, was heavily involved in philanthropy, donating a considerable proportion of annual profits to a wide range of cultural projects and charities. More recently the company had also begun to engage in the environmental sustainability agenda. Northlands sustainability initiatives lacked a coherent strategy or institutional home within the company. The two key personnel with a direct remit for environmental sustainability were the Director of Facilities Management and the Development Surveyor; more traditional CSR functions were largely directly under the control of the Chairman and CEO who delegated to various personnel, while both also had an active interest in sustainability issues. The Chief Operating Officer played a further, complicating role, while the relatively junior Marketing Manager, who was in theory responsible for communication of these activities, lacked any strategic remit to do so.

The commercial property sector is not one considered advanced in terms of corporate social responsibility or sustainability. Nevertheless a 2009 survey of executives in the sector, found that ‘sustainability’ was a “critical business issue” for 70% of respondents and 60% were adopting workplace strategies to meet “sustainability goals” (CoreNet, 2009).

### 8.2.1 ‘Northlands’ Values’

A workshop had been conducted with senior management to develop ‘Northland’s Values’. A commonplace technique in brand management, developing ‘brand values’ involves selecting a number of named ‘values’ (in this case twelve) that encapsulate and express the core positive features or attributes through which the brand wishes to be known. Each value is commonly given a ‘tag line’ explaining the operationalisation of the value or offering further definition of it. For example:

“Integrity: our hard won reputation is built upon it”

“Can do: be flexible, always be willing to go the extra mile”
The ‘brand values’ therefore seek to identify and illustrate ‘positive’ values, attitudes and behaviours, attributed to the corporate culture, that the company wants to associate with, or are constituent of, the brand. Their role is to be communicated didactically, primarily to an internal audience, and to inform, frame and structure further brand management communications. They may literally serve as the basis for internal communication,75 be operationalised in company activities76 or serve simply as an initial focus for the development of brand management programmes. In the case of Northlands the brand values provided an initial focus for developing the sustainability communications strategy, feeding into the scoping study (below), but were not further operationalised.

However, one key function of a brand values workshop is didactic: initiating senior management into the expansive notion of ‘brand’ that branding practitioners conjure into being. For the uninitiated ‘brand’ might well have the far more restrictive connotations of what is now commonly called the ‘visual identity of the brand’—logos, design schemes, and company Pantone colours. The brand

---

75 One large UK blue chip company describes them thus in a ‘resource booklet’ produced for an internal audience concerned with brand management: “Our values make us who we are. They are about the way we do the things we do, the attitude we bring to work with us, and how every individual affects the customer experience.”

76 The same company ran an internal competition for employees to produce very short work related stories based on individual values.
values workshop therefore aims to initiate the future commissioners of work into an understanding of the kinds of work that the global ambitions of brand management encompass.

Cronin (2004b: 31) notes that brands “...should not be understood simply as tools used by [advertising] agencies to mediate ideas about products to consumers: a brand functions as an organising nexus, drawing together and articulating the commercial imperatives of agencies, practitioners’ role in ‘qualifying’ products, and consumers’ imaginative investment in their potential relationship to the product”. Here ‘the product’ should be understood as the Sustainability Report and ‘the consumers’ its audiences.

We might extend the understanding of the position of this nexus further. Brands not only ”provide a tangible site around which agencies’ claims to...commercial legitimacy and creative expertise are centred” (ibid.), they are the site of contestation between the performative ambitions of cultural intermediaries and ultimate control of brand owners.

8.3 The Scoping Study and Sustainability Strategy

A key project prior to the commissioning of the Sustainability Report had laid the foundations for its commission. This was a scoping study of corporate sustainability policies and communication strategies, leading to recommendations for a sustainability structure and programme.

The output of the scoping study was a presentation by the Agency’s CEO to Northlands’ Board. The purpose of the study was to identify: what market leaders in the commercial property sector were doing in their own sustainability communications programmes; “sustainability leaders” in the private sector as examples of best practice; “key networks and influencers” in corporate sustainability; and to discuss Northlands’ brand’s “strategic positioning”. Again, then, its purpose was didactic: to inculcate senior management into the world of sustainability communications; to provide them with the resources with which to discuss how a sustainability communications and engagement strategy might be enacted.

The scoping study presented Northlands with a situation where some of the biggest companies in the commercial property sector had learned the lessons of integrating sustainability into their “brand proposition” from the leaders in corporate sustainability. Northlands, however, was failing to exploit the latent potentiality of its brand, both through the inadequate realisation of the techniques of modern brand management and a failure to operationalise sustainability through its brand. A key slide in the presentation, titled “Evolving the Northlands’ Brand” summed the situation up thus:
“Where we are:

-We want to utilise our track record on sustainability and social issues so that this becomes a more central part of the company’s brand proposition.

-Northlands already has a brand - it just hasn’t been adequately shared or expressed.

The strong set of existing corporate values is the building block of any brand evolution.”

Fig. 8 Slides from the scoping study presentation: commercial property sector analysis
Key phrases - overused?

- Progressive developers and investors responding proactively to the sustainability challenge
- Services that demonstrate value
- Sustainability is a fundamental
- Sustainability is beyond compliance
- The property industry’s profligate use of carbon cannot continue

Fig. 8 cont. Slides from the scoping study presentation: commercial property sector analysis.

Drivers Jonas Deloitte

-Sustainability is a fundamental property and business concern and without exception cuts across every surveying and planning discipline. That's why, at Drivers Jonas Deloitte, we have a co-ordinated team of sector-leading specialists across all areas of the firm. Our expertise is reflected in a number of industry accolades, including the Inaugural 'Estates Gazette Green Property Advisor of the Year Award'.
A number of studies have taken a broadly neo-institutionalist (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) approach to the diffusion and institutionalization of CSR and corporate sustainability (Lammers, 2003; Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Wehmeier and Schultz, 2010; Windell, 2006) which are broadly compatible with a practice theory approach (Schatzki, 2011). The “institutional environment” in which the corporation operates is crucial to a multi-level process of translation of practices and ideas. Wehmeier and Schultz (2010: 13) suggest: “What triggers institutionalization processes within organizations is the interaction of external conditions, negotiated definitions of problems and mutual constructions of expectations between corporations and other organizations”.

The relative backwardness of the commercial property sector in institutionalising sustainability and sustainability communications might be seen to be a function of its relative isolation from some of the key triggers of external conditions: namely, the activities of campaigning NGOs and their intermediations of public expectations of social responsibility; the interplay between corporate and media communications that such NGO activities elicit and provoke; and the institutional arrangements that over time such civil society-corporate interactions produce, such as membership in multi-stakeholder forums which expose corporations to increasing communication with the coalition of corporate sustainability. The sector’s lack of consumer-facing brand presence is itself a key determination of this relative isolation.
None the less, the institutional environment in which the company and sector operates is changing. The sector is engaging with the central (voluntary) institution of corporate sustainability communications: the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). The GRI is the world’s most extensively used sustainability reporting framework; 1500 organisations globally, including many of the world’s leading brands, use the GRI guidelines for their sustainability reporting (GRI, 2010). The GRI initiates work on ‘sector supplements’, which recognise the need for reporting tailored to the specifics of certain industries, when a quorum of companies in a sector approach the GRI with interests and the ability to fund the development of the guidelines. A Construction and Real Estate Sector supplement was under consultation at the time the Northlands Report was being produced, with a date for completion in 2011 (ibid.).

What the Agency can be seen to be doing in its scoping study presentations is performatively staging an encounter between senior management and the latent elements of this emerging institutional environment: seeking to trigger institutionalisation, negotiate the definition of problems, and convoke the “mutual constructions of expectations between corporations and other organizations” (Wehmeier and Schultz, op cit.). For example, the GRI sector supplement under consultation was discovered through research on best practice for the Sustainability Report; a briefing note for senior management prepared, and a section of the Sustainability Report on the GRI and the company’s aspiration to adopt GRI reporting guidelines approved.

A central part of the scoping study was to present best practice examples of acknowledged corporate ‘sustainability leaders’. Here clearly practitioners mediate processes of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983):

“They [the Board] loved these steering wheel graphics, they’re: ‘We should have something like that in ours’.” (Agency CEO)
Fig. 9 Enacting isomorphism—slides from the scoping study presentation of ‘best practice’ in corporate sustainability communications

**Unilever**

- **Sector:** Retail
- **Key Messages**
  - Unilever is one of the world’s leading consumer goods companies
  - We aim to provide people the world over with products that are good for them and good for others
- **Core Values**
  - We aim to manage and grow our business successfully around the world as a trusted corporate citizen, respected for the values and standards by which we behave.
- **Tone**
  - Succinct, straightforward, direct

---

**Our Brand Imprint process**

- **Impacts**
  - Environmental
  - Customer
  - Market Leader

- **Influences**
  - by brands/products

---

**Our Vitality Framework**

- Sustainability
  - Product
  - Marketing
  - Operations
  - Supply Chain
  - Environmental
  - Social
  - Economic

Unilever’s vision is clear: to do only what is necessary to create a better product for the consumer, with a sustainable supply chain and a commitment to ethical and environmental practices.
8.4 The Sustainability Report

The initial plan for producing the Report was calculated at 52 hours preparatory research and editorial planning, 160 hours ‘editorial’ or writing time and 122 hours design time. The project was scheduled to take four months with a cost to the client of around £25,000. It would involve the CEO as strategic lead, a junior account manager, three copywriters and a graphic designer.

My role was as editorial lead with an initial brief to produce an ‘Editorial Overview’: an overview of the Report, its relation to prior work, the sector, company and brand, as well as brief summaries of all sections. The process began by familiarisation with a 145 page ‘resource document’ which compiled all extant relevant material: previous commissions for Northlands, including the scoping study and sustainability strategy, and information from the company on the state of play of its various environmental and CSR initiatives.

A ‘flat planning’ meeting was then held with myself, another copywriter, the account manager and CEO. The Flat Plan is the basic reference and planning document for print publications: it is a literal plan of each printed page of the document. The Flat Plan is likely to undergo multiple iterations as content is revised, sections reordered, word counts reconsidered and client feedback integrated. The Flat Plan is therefore the key negotiated object between practitioner and client.

Firstly, ‘sustainability’ or CSR issues around which the company could be shown to have activity were identified, for example: a policy on biodiversity and sponsorship of cultural institutions. These were mapped onto phrases developed as part of the prior brand work (“We believe in the life of cities”) which served as loose thematic groupings.

The meeting brought together two broad sets of knowledge, around sustainability and commercial communications. Expert knowledge of communications derived from professional experience informed issues such as the editorial ‘tone’, word counts, proportion of text to graphics and so on. Whilst the meeting participants drew upon the resource document, for both the range of possible company activities that could be included and prior branding work which developed key words and phrases, they also drew on a broad universe of understanding of ‘sustainability’ in which the chosen topics are meaningful as ‘issues’. Rather than expert knowledge, necessarily, this broad understanding of sustainability is derived from a common, mass mediated informational environment. This is not to say fellow practitioners did not necessarily possess expert knowledge of
sustainability issues, simply to acknowledge the ubiquity of discourses of sustainability, such that ‘waste’, ‘recycling’, ‘climate change’, ‘energy’, or ‘wildlife & biodiversity’ are intelligible to non-experts as components of ‘sustainability’ that a company might engage with, enact or impact upon.

Fig. 10 Flat plan brainstorm

Where an expert knowledge was employed here it was of sustainability communications: specifically of the norms and procedures of sustainability reporting. The publication of a firm’s first sustainability report commonly represents the implementation, integration, and codification of practices of sustainability within the firm and the ‘reporting cycle’ thereafter largely defines the setting of targets and implementation of policies. It is a commonplace for the commencement of sustainability reporting by a firm to be couched in terms of a set of continually improving targets and key performance indicators, such as reduction of waste streams and carbon intensity of operations.

Expert knowledge of sustainability issues is very much valued within the Agency. The CEO put it thus: “...we also are wedded to the idea of building up the knowledge of our team in the area they work in, whether its renewable or climate change...we didn’t want the client always to be having to brief us as to what the UK Climate Change Act said...so the knowledge base is really important...You can see the relief on the clients face when you drop ‘eutrophication’ into a conversation, you know...or, you know...‘biodiversity’...you don’t have to explain all of that because we’ve been there many, many times before...and that knowledge grows over time and that’s really important because we do have a relatively low staff turnover which for sustainability comms is really important because you do have people reinventing the wheel all the time”.

139
Moreover, as consultancy AccountAbility note (Forstater, et al., 2006: 11): “…some evidence suggests that the process of building a public report is the single most important driver of change in how things to be reported are managed, since it increases organisational knowledge, enables reflection and catalyses policies and practices”.

While sustainability reports may be largely discursive, presenting broad brush stroke commitments, policies and aspirations, such reports are usually considered by commentators as second-rate, lacking in substance, or at worst greenwash.

In the case of Northlands it was evident that the company was some way from instituting the specialised set of auditing and monitoring procedures necessary to provide the range of data, figures and targets that best practice reporting demanded. The Report could not therefore claim to be reporting on anything like a convincing set of indicators. It could in short not be shown to be reporting on anything like an integrated programme. Instead, the Agency’s approach therefore, was that the Report should explicitly signal that its publication announced the start of the reporting process and communicate a broad set of commitments and aspirations, together with whatever concrete targets or achievements could be marshalled. And as such it should clearly signal it did not pertain to the genre of sustainability report proper. This was to be achieved by adopting a “journalistic, magazine style - feature led and painting the ‘Big Picture’” as it was dubbed on the iteration below.

Despite this somewhat non-traditional format the Agency’s CEO argued that nevertheless the Report would be strongly performative:

“The reason why comms has to come closer to the heart of environmental strategy is that they want comms to structure their strategy—which is not uncommon. Told them we had to write the sustainability report so you have an over view. We had to remind them of stuff they’d done. Doing this process marks a point on the journey, from which they can’t go back.”

The basic Flat Plan was further finessed by the CEO. The intended audience for the Report was discussed to establish the tone, level of language and complexity of content. Quite who sustainability reports are written for is, unsurprisingly, a topic of common discussion amongst practitioners; that “nobody reads them” a not uncommon comment. In the case of Northlands the magazine style was hoped to make the report more accessible and the company’s physical infrastructure would facilitate hard copy distribution (the Report could be distributed in multiple
lobbies, delivered to commercial tenants). The ‘aspiration’ for the audience was set at 300 key individuals: Northlands management; professional tenants and tenant company management; and regional ‘names’ or interested figures in local civic elites: “This is a professional audience, we can offer a sophisticated understanding of sustainability” (CEO).

Northlands sustainability initiatives therefore could move from being backstage to be being presented as value-added services provided to customers, and thus valorising those initiatives for the firm. In turn those initiatives would become part of their customers own ‘sustainability journeys’. The Sustainability Report was therefore positioned as both didactic and performative. Tenants would learn to understand themselves as customers of sustainability services through the report; and at the same time the reporting process would structure and embed Northlands’ sustainability strategy.

Fig. 11 First iteration of the Flat Plan
The Editorial Overview was then produced. The Report was intended to interweave: general journalistic content highlighting the relevance of an issue, such as increasing urbanisation, to sustainability in the round; to link this to activities of the company (e.g. the company donation to a climate change adaptation initiative); to briefly summarise ‘Activity and measurement’ and ‘Policies and commitments’; and present ‘sound bites’ from interviews with relevant authorities (consultants, academics), civic leaders (a business forum leader, head of a major regeneration project) or senior management.

The Report would be framed by the convention of the Chairman’s Introduction, and a less than conventional futurological ‘thought piece’ by, it was proposed, Diana Balmori, an internationally recognised architect and urbanist, known for innovating ‘sustainable systems’, which would locate a sustainable Northlands in a scenario for 2050.

The Report explicitly drew on the metaphor of sustainability as a journey. Corporate sustainability is routinely discursively articulated as a goal orientated process, where targets met represent way-stations on the ‘road to sustainability’, rather than as a sustanably reproduced state of affairs. ‘Sustainability as a journey’ is a prevalent metaphor in businesses’ representations of their engagement with sustainability (Milne, Kearin and Walton 2006), reproduced in a number of key informant interviews. Indeed the use of the phrase ‘sustainability journey’ to describe the firm’s organisational and technical adaptation is fast becoming a communications cliché.

Milne et al argue that: “The journey metaphor employed in corporate social reports and elsewhere in the business literature is...a potent ideology embracing a fundamental lack of transformation.
[which] translates sustainability (and sustainable development) into a never-ending process privileging the search for technical consensus.” (2006: 825)

While for Milne et al the journey metaphor functions to defer the radical change from business-as-usual practices implied by a ‘strong’ version of sustainability, for sustainability professionals I spoke to it simply represented a recognition that current business practices were a very long way away from genuine sustainability.

Rather than “a potent ideology embracing a fundamental lack of transformation” (ibid.) I found amongst interviewees engaged in actual corporate sustainability programmes a profound sense of the radical transformations that the ‘road to sustainability’ would demand; even if these disruptions were not routinely conceived as occurring on a fundamentally political level. We might argue that the journey metaphor does not signal endless deferral of the state of transformation but humility: that the end-state, the end of the journey, was radically unknown.

There were three further internal iterations of the Flat Plan, a fourth after feedback from Northlands Chairman (three months into the project); there were seven iterations of the content. Two ‘client meetings’ were held with the Marketing Manager, the point of contact for the project. The Agency CEO and account manager also met twice with Northlands Chairman and CEO, along with the Marketing Manager. A design meeting was held internally between the graphic designer and editorial team and design meetings were held with the Marketing Manager and additionally the Chairman and CEO. Eighteen short phone interviews were conducted. The deadline was extended by a month and half, largely due to continuing difficulty in accessing technical information from the company, and additional fees were signed off.

Can any particular discourse of sustainability be said to be called upon or contested within the agreed content of the Report? Or was it simply mined, as previously suggested, from the available informational resources of a ubiquitous, mediatised rag bag of elements that make up our contemporary, promiscuous ‘sustainability’—a sustainability one could be no more against than one could be against curing cancer, or good weather.

The repertoires of meaning mobilised within the Report are certainly promiscuous: techniques of auditing, of creating metrics and targets; operationalisations of ecological modernization—energy efficiency, resource use, waste management; notions such as ‘quality of life’, ‘wellbeing’ and ‘community’; hope; and systems thinking—the city region as socio-economic system, ecosystems, the global system.
However I would suggest the Report does integrate these diverse repertoires—into an ecological, systems model in which the firm is temporally and spatially embedded in, and dynamically related to, socio-technical networks in which and through which its sustainability\unsustainability flows into the sustainability\unsustainability of the regional and global ecological and socio-technical system.

The report announces and seeks to enact the start of the ‘sustainability journey’ to an end state of organisational sustainability (‘Northlands 2050’), which is a pre-requisite of being in the sustainable world of the future—a world where opportunities will have been realised and risks mitigated. Ironically, while I have argued the metaphor of the sustainability journey should not be equated with an ideology of perpetually deferred transformation, in presenting an end state of ‘sustainability achieved’ the Report ultimately elides the possibility that the firm, and the economic system of which it is part, is incommensurate with such an end state of sustainability.

### 8.5 Conclusion

At several stages in this process the content had been ‘signed off’ by senior management, including by the Chairman. Finally, however, with only a few gaps to be filled in by the company sustainability professionals, the Chairman changed his mind. The Report would not be published. A couple of months later the company’s Annual Report appeared. It contained 400 words on ‘Sustainability’ and 400 words on ‘CSR’. The only direct output of the Agency’s Report project to see the light of day, that I am aware of, is a single line of ‘brand positioning’. This serves as a salutary reminder of the relative positions of power of the cultural intermediary of sustainability and the corporation.

Nevertheless, we can see in the processes through which practices and components are potentially translated into the firm. DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 151) suggest mimetic modelling is a response to uncertainty, and stress consultancies may play a key role here. In this instance we also witness the firm seeking to adopt new practices (reporting) which will operationalise and valorise existing practices (its existing CSR commitments). Normative pressures, DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 152) suggest, arise largely from professionalization, and in this instance, the promotion of international and sectoral standards in CSR reporting.

In the example of CSR reporting it is the institutional framework of standards which serves the primary institutionalisation function of which practitioners are carriers. Indeed several key informants noted that despite the widely noted ambiguity of sustainability, in the case of CSR reporting specifically there is very little ambiguity due to widely shared definitions of ‘materiality’. Materiality is a concept originating in auditing. Information is material if its omission or
misstatement could influence economic decisions taken on the basis of the financial statements (e.g. by investors or regulators). It therefore provides a standard for disclosure. Adapted to CSR it therefore relates to disclosure of information on environmental and social impacts. As the ‘users’ of CSR metrics are not defined on a commercial or fiduciary basis, those users for whom issues are ‘material’ are deemed to be defined stakeholder groups. The Global Reporting Initiative provides standards for materiality disclosure, the process of stakeholder identification and so on (see Forstater, et al., 2006).

We also witness that whilst the discursive positions of Northlands and the Agency are far apart it is not a case that the CSR report writing process is one of discursive struggle between an ecological discourse on the one hand and a economic rationality on the other. The failure of the Report to materialise was not due to discursive constraints, but, it emerged, probably due to the failure of the company to institute the back office practices that the CSR report co-ordinates and integrates. As the Creative Director of another agency commented: “Sustainability communications are far from mollifying for companies, it’s more a case of sticking their heads above the parapet” (KI-9). In this case those in charge of technical corporate sustainability became worried that in the absence of those practices being fully in place the Report would open them up to reputational risk. For the Agency the report was an instrument to force those practices upon the firm through communicative commitment. Discussing the project a year later the CEO of the Agency commented: “Sometimes people just don’t get it and ultimately if they aren’t prepared to commit to it then our relationship with them is likely to break down”.
PART THREE

Chapter Nine: Imagining the Sustainable Consumer

“[T]he social sciences do not so much need to find answers about how much demand is pre-structured—participants are much better placed to do this—but to explore mechanisms by which participants perform this demand.”

Michel Callon (2002b: 211)

“The ethical consumer does exist - but the normal consumer might be more interesting.”

Solitaire Townsend, CEO Futerra Communication (Townsend, 2011)

9.1 Introduction

This chapter examines both how commercial sustainability communications seeks to instantiate ‘the sustainable consumer’ and the diffuse understandings of the consuming subject that lie behind this. This is one of the key ways in which sustainability communications functions as a cultural intermediary of sustainability – not in terms of enabling or constraining particular understandings of sustainability so much as articulating particular understandings of the consumer and thus sustainable consumption.

I argue that collective or social actors (Hindess, 1989, 1990)—such as governments, corporations and civil society organisations—frame and mobilise the figure of the ‘ethical’ or ‘sustainable consumer’ for their own ends (Barnett et al, 2011; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Miller and Rose, 2008). Commercial sustainability communications agencies both provide expert services to enable these ends and may themselves be such actors, framing the consumer during interaction with clients and other actors.

As discussed briefly in Section 4.2, the ethical consumption movement has actively sought to problematise consumption (Barnett et al, 2011). “Market campaigns” (Harrison 2005) continually challenge the authenticity of consumer-facing commercial brands in pursuit of their political and social agendas (Holt, 2002). Corporate sustainability discourse has largely come to share this rationality of problematised consumption. On this terrain commercial brands seek to legitimize themselves as articulators, interlocutors and facilitators of public concerns around sustainability.

78 By which I include the environmental, animal welfare, trade justice and workers’ rights movements that address consumption in one way or another.
through strategic efforts to demonstrate their commitments to sustainability and, I argue, through their attempts to instantiate ‘the sustainable consumer’ (the consumer of that sustainability). In doing so, they seek to ground their appeals to authenticity.

Commercial sustainability communications plays a key role in this endeavour. I draw upon material from my fieldwork, interviews and wider documentary sources to explore how commercial sustainability communications seeks to instantiate the sustainable consumer. It is useful to invoke the dual definition of instantiate here: to produce a concrete instance of an abstract or virtual principle; and to make an object available for use.

Instantiating the sustainable consumer, then, is the attempt to make the imagined consumer of cultural intermediaries real and available to the ends of the project in which it is instantiated (whether the purchase of products, the use of products, or a modification of everyday practice). The chapter identifies modes through which brands and practitioners of sustainability communications seek to realise this goal. I identify four modes of instantiation as analytical categories: enabling; didactic; reflexive; and advocative segmentation.

Sustainability communications are addressed to multiple kinds of actors. Where concerned to intervene in individuals’ consumption, more often than not, they are directed at employees, or citizens, rather than to consumers per se. For example, during the period of my fieldwork, the Agency was commissioned by a county council to produce a climate change campaign directed at local residents, in which people were enlisted to make specific pledges to reduce their energy use (drive less, wash at 30°C, turn the thermostat down, etc). In another project, as part of the property company Northlands’ sustainability initiative, employees were engaged with a programme encouraging cycling to work. Both involved consumption, but neither were framed in terms of the consumer. A distinction, then, can be made between the subject of consumption addressed by sustainability communications not conceived as ‘the consumer’ (e.g. the citizen, or the employee) and the sustainable consumer qua consumer. I want to suggest that, in many instances, when sustainability communications addresses the subject of consumption it deploys a naïve practice perspective, where it is recognised that consumption is undertaken chiefly as a component of practices that reproduce everyday life, or where “…consumption is not itself a practice, but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice” (Warde, 2005: 137).

Where the subject of consumption is addressed as consumer, on the other hand, the implicit model tends to default to the portfolio model of the actor, discussed below (Hindess, 1988, 1989, 1990; Whitford, 2002; Warde and Southerton, 2012). This is unsurprising given the model’s ubiquity, as
well as the deliberative consumption contexts to which such communications are generally directed. At a lower level of abstraction we see in the different modes of instantiation both attempts to appeal to the sovereign consumer and to engage the ‘citizen-consumer’\(^{79}\) - the new consumer of ethically problematised consumption (Barnett et al, 2011).

This discussion has the wider aim of problematising the place of ‘the consumer’ in discourses of sustainable consumption. As discussed in Section 2.3, the sociology of consumption has offered a sustained critique of both the model of the rational, sovereign, utility-maximising consumer of economics (and so much political discourse) and the expressive consumer found in theories of consumption from Veblen (1899) onwards (and much popular discourse) (e.g. Gronow and Warde, 2001). More recently, the sociology of sustainable consumption has critiqued the model of the consumer implicit in policy initiatives and behaviour change programmes (e.g. Shove, 2010). This chapter foregrounds the negotiated and contested nature of the consumer and suggests that the models of the subject of consumption that sustainability communications deploys are perhaps more varied than might be expected, and amenable to constructive dialogue with a practice-oriented understanding of consumption.

I turn first to an example of an attempt to instantiate the sustainable consumer from my fieldwork and then proceed to address imaginings and models of the consumer.

### 9.2 Creating Consumers of Sustainability

The major project in which I engaged whilst working at the Agency was the writing of the first sustainability report for a large commercial property company, Northlands, which I detail in Chapter Eight. A vexed question for writers of such reports is: who is the audience? Who reads sustainability reports? “No one”, is the knowing reply from some in the business. Reports are written for ‘stakeholders’ and certainly not consumers, for whom, at most, ancillary communications on corporate sustainability will be crafted in heavily abbreviated and modified form. However, in the case of the Northlands report the decision had been made that, given the company was not yet advanced enough in the technical processes of data collection on which such reports depend, and given much of its sustainability strategy was still aspirational, the report had to signal this position clearly. The inaugural report was to be just that: a summary of current achievements and aims.

certainly, but a statement of intent towards a full reporting process, rather than the output of such a process. In order to clearly signal this, the decision was taken to produce a magazine style publication, visually distinct from the staid genre of sustainability reporting.

This genre decision opened up possibilities around the intended audience. As the publication was designed to be visually attractive and accessible to the general reader the option to target it wider than the usual ‘stakeholders’ emerged. The magazine style articles would engage readers on general sustainability topics—the future of urbanisation, biodiversity and so on—and then link these general topics to the company’s projects and programmes.

Northland’s tenants were, then, a possible audience. The 30,000 or so tenants were largely small to medium professional and service firms. In discussing who these tenants were it was commented that a good proportion of them would be educated “broadsheet readers” and “capable of a relatively sophisticated view of sustainability”. Part of the motivation for the company to produce the report was promotional. Northlands already had substantial investments in sustainability initiatives, but although unusually conscious of its brand for a property company, was deriving no promotional benefit from these activities. Again, an obvious audience for such promotion was its tenants. Northlands put a particular emphasis on its service ethos. Tenants were referred to as customers. The idea of communicating to its customers was likely to be well received.

It was agreed tenants should form an important element of the audience – not en masse, rather, as well as using the infrastructure of building lobbies and so on for distribution, owners and senior management in tenant firms would be targeted. How though was this publication to relate to them as customers, how could this readership be motivated to actually open and read the report? The breakthrough came in positioning the company as a provider of sustainability services, and the tenants as the consumers of those services.

Given the nature of the tenant companies, their own sustainability impacts could largely be attributed to the use of energy and resources in the buildings they occupied, and how they travelled to work. Rather than passive recipients the tenants would be made aware of their proxy sustainability impacts and henceforth be positioned as consumers of the sustainability services—energy efficiency, recycling, green travel schemes—that Northlands would provide. Northlands’ sustainability efforts would be seen to create value for them as customers.

While one or two new schemes —such as promoting cycling to work—were envisaged, this positioning of the tenants as consumers of sustainability services did not involve the creation of any
value-added services, rather it served to add perceived value to the existing services tenants received.

Practically this could involve marketing materials directed specifically at the customer audience making this proposition explicit and framing with reference to the cycling promotion and other customer-directed schemes. The report publication itself would then serve two purposes. Firstly, its very existence, and its aesthetic appeal (it was intended to be design-focused and produced on high quality paper) would act indexically to signal a sensibility: Northlands was the sort of progressive company to have a sustainability programme. But more importantly the content of the report—where each article opened with a global sustainability issues before relating this back to the company’s activities—would act didactically to underscore the tenants’ position as consumers of sustainability services. The value of those services could only be realised as benefits to the customer if the customer learned to imagine themselves in a web of connections—electricity grids, transport systems, supply chains—in which their actions made impacts and for which they held some degree of responsibility. The hidden infrastructures that the company provided and was linked to had to be fore-grounded for the tenants to experience themselves as consumers of sustainability.

In short, the Northlands report would act as a device for the instantiation of sustainable consumers. I turn now to examine the figure of the consumer itself.

9.3 Imagining the Consumer: the King in his Kingdom, Serfs in the Mass

“We—the mass of common men and women in all countries—also comprise the world’s market... Hence it is ourselves as consumers who stand in a central relation to all economies of the world, like the king in his kingdom. As producers we go into a particular factory, farm or mine, but as consumers we are set by nature thus to give leadership, aim and purpose to the whole of the economic world. That we are not kings, but serfs in the mass, is due to our failure to think and act together as consumers and so to realise out true position and power.”

Percy Redfern, *The Consumers’ Place in Society* (1920: 12)

In order for production in consumer society to be organised, for markets to be constructed, and for products to be culturally embedded in them (Slater 2002a, 2002b) ‘the consumer’ must be imagined. Representations of the consumer can be an important determinant upon the formation and operation of areas of economic activity; “a necessary part of the conditions of existence of
...markets” as Nixon puts it (2002: 133). The consumer’s motivations, values, attitudes, beliefs and desires, that are imputed to underlie their actions, must be made available for use through expertise; whether through psychoanalytically informed motivational research (Miller and Rose 2008), sophisticated quantitative consumer segmentation (Burrows and Gane, 2006), or guess work informed by detailed knowledge of brands, popular culture and media and a smattering of cultural theory (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001; Slater 2002b).

A number of sociological studies have explored the invention of new categories of consumer, each of which requires imaginative labour: whether the “informal conceptual models” of “mother” and “child” that Cook (2004) found at work in the development of the children’s clothing market in department stores in the interwar years in the US; or the invention of a generic, culturally distinct ‘Latino’ consumer, identified as one of the fastest growing market segments in the US at the turn of the millennium, serviced by a Hispanic advertising industry (Davila, 2001). Equally, the ‘ordinary consumer’ is brought into being. Blaszczyk (2000) examined the development of consumer society in the US between the 1860s and 1940s through mass market manufacturers and retailers. Blaszczyk argues that individual firms’ survival depended on their success at mediating between design innovation and cultural taste through mechanisms to imagine the ‘ordinary consumer’ through a proliferation of market intermediaries.

But it is of course not only the ‘Captains of Consciousness’ (Ewan, 1976) in the commercial communications professions who have imagined ‘the consumer’, nor can ‘the consumer’ be said to be a creature of their invention. The genealogies of the consumer are varied and long (see especially Gabriel and Lang 1995 and Trentmann 2006, 2010). To quote Trentmann: “the identity, morality and sensibility of the modern consumer had to be mapped out in the course of modern history before it could become a social category that could be taken for granted, circulated, embraced and resisted” (2010: 45). We find instantiations of the consumer in discourses as varied as those of: Victorian civic rights and public accountability (Trentmann, 2006); the Co-operative Movement (Black and Robertson, 2009; Gurney, 1996); consumer activism and consumer protection movements (Cohen, 2003; Hilton, 2008); as well as, ethical consumerism (Barnett, et al. 2011), neoliberalism (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001), postmodernism (Lury, 1996) and of course, neoclassical economics.

Beneath the varied costumes of niche markets, discourses and movements lies the ontological shop manikin of the sovereign consumer, so naturalised and normalised that we tend to forget it is there: “a distinctive social and discursive category – a shared space that can be occupied, appealed to, and
offers a common rule with which people can identify themselves or be identified with”, as Trentmann puts it (op cit.).

Schwarzkopf (2011a) problematises this all too familiar figure by drawing attention to its quasi-theological origins, and reminds us that conceptions of the consumer are not uncommonly tied to normative projects. Schwarzkopf argues that “the idea of consumer sovereignty provided a key idea that connected the notion of the consumer as market agent with the tenets of democracy” (2011a: 109):

“Based on the proclaimed sovereignty of the people and the norm that all legitimate political power has to be rooted in the will of the people, consumer sovereignty declares the consumer as the market’s Archimedean point, its king. This king exercises sovereignty through choices which act as individual votes.” (ibid.)

With the Enlightenment ‘the people’ replaced the monarch as the legitimating centre of political thought and ascended to the metaphysical level of the eternal, mystical body with sovereign status that the monarch once held (ibid.: 112). With the concept of consumer sovereignty a strong analogy is drawn between the aggregate choices that supposedly move the economy and the aggregate choices that are realised in democracy. Thus Schwarzkopf notes: “Ultimately, 19th-century liberalism could no longer differentiate between markets and politics, and the former became envisaged as constituted by a body of sovereign consumers” (ibid.: 113).

But it was, argues Schwarzkopf, the development of market research methods in the 1930s and 1940s such as consumer juries and panel surveys, which provided sophisticated techniques for the measurement of consumer preferences—a scientific feedback apparatus between the spheres of consumption and production—that brought to the fore the notion of the sovereign consumer ‘vote’ and the marketplace as a “democracy of goods” (2011b: 8). These developments coincided with the popularization of the Austrian School of Economics in Britain and the United States, which rediscovered the notion of consumer sovereignty in order to ideologically align the capitalist market economy with democracy (Schwarzkopf, 2011b). Schwarzkopf argues that at the heart of the popularization of this concept were the commercial communications industries:

“Unsurprisingly, the advertising industries both in the United States and in the Europe were very keen on developing and exploiting the symbolic equation between mass consumers and a democratic electorate or a jury as it allowed advertisers to present themselves as a force that made the market more responsive to consumer needs and, through market research, as a mechanism that
gave consumers the chance to hold manufacturers to account...By that virtue, advertising professionals and consumer researchers were now able to claim a share in the defence of democracy during the struggles of the Depression and the Second World War [and] present themselves as social forces that allowed the democratic voice of the real sovereign of America—the hard-working housewife, the honest shopper—to be heard as loud and as clear as possible.” (Schwarzkopf, 2011b: 12-13)

Schwarzkopf’s account is useful in drawing our attention to the capacity for the consumer to be mobilised by normative projects and the interests of commercial communications in co-opting such ideas for its own legitimation. In the following chapter I examine a contemporary version of such a project in which the sustainable consumer comes to the fore.

More recently, the neoliberal political project exemplified by Thatcherism pushed the model of the sovereign consumer still further, no longer simply drawing a structural analogy between consumer choice and democratic participation (or ennobling consumer choice as a form of democratic participation), but vaunting the model of consumer choice “as the most adequate model of all forms of modern citizenship and social action [and] the market as the only means of coordination that secured both freedom and progress” (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 37).

Beneath the autonomous, sovereign consumer—so common in contemporary discourse, whether theoretical, political and popular—we find a particular ontological structure of the actor which Hindess calls “the portfolio model” (Hindess, 1988, 1989, 1990). This common model of the subject, argues Hindess, is shared, despite all their apparent opposition, by both theoretical traditions of structuralism and methodological individualism (1990: 87). The portfolio model is one where the subject possesses a more or less stable portfolio of beliefs and desires which inform action: “Given a situation of action the actor selects from its portfolio of beliefs and desires [or “interests” (Hindess 1990:88)], and uses them to decide on the course of action” (Hindess, 1988: 44). Thus for the structuralist the “content of the portfolio is a function of the actor’s social location” (1990.88).The rational choice model of the sovereign consumer makes a further refinement of the model, adding the assumption that the actor’s portfolio of desires has a utilitarian structure (ibid).

Hindess’ central point is that the portfolio model is “itself the refinement of something more general and abstract” and therefore not the “unquestionable starting point for intentional analysis” (1988.49). This more general model is Hindess’ minimal model of the actor, unencumbered with the presumption of the portfolio as the necessary source of action. In this minimal model the actor “must be capable of reaching decisions and of acting on some of them” (1989:160); thus enabling for
Hindess the theorisation of collective social actors, such as governments or businesses, and the exclusion from that definition of social actor hypostatised entities, such as social classes.

It is this portfolio model of action of the sovereign consumer in the dominant discourse of consumption that is criticised in the sociology of sustainable consumption for misrepresenting the dynamics of consumption, and thus misdirecting policy initiatives, principally by individualising issues of consumption and directing programmes towards attitudinal and value change as a pre-requisite of behavioural change (Evans et al, 2012; Shove, 2010; Warde and Southerton 2012).

‘The consumer’ is, then, a deeply contested figure. The rich history of the consumer demonstrates the consumer framed and mobilised in historically specific and contingent ways and instantiated within the contexts of interaction between markets, governance structures and everyday life (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). How then does sustainability communications imagine the sustainable consumer? To begin to explore this question I want to look at two contradictory views within the field. One in which the sovereign consumer has gone green, thus demonstrating a widespread demand for corporate sustainability, and another in which such demand is a mirage and the consumer is all but absent from the stage of corporate sustainability.

9.4 ‘Everyday Experts’ or the ‘Ethical Consumer Canard’?

In 2011 Futerra, the UK’s best know sustainability communications agency, re-designed supermarket chain ASDA’s online sustainability pages “to be as accessible to everyday consumers as the rest of their site” (Futerra, 2012). The re-design was motivated by a major market research programme, in which Futerra “provided strategic insight into consumer behaviour change and sustainable lifestyles” (ASDA, 2012b: 9): eight monthly surveys of a 6000 strong online customer panel looked into “how they look at sustainability and green living”. The resulting report, Green is Normal, opens by introducing the reader to the panel – its “Everyday Experts,” who, we are told, are representative of the UK population as whole, making their “values, attitudes, and behaviours around sustainability… a powerful barometer for the whole UK public”:

“We believe this makes what our Everyday Experts have to say important reading for anyone who cares about sustainable development in the UK.” (ibid.)

The core message of the report is that “Sustainability is the new normal”: “A whole host of so-called ‘sustainable behaviours’ are now as normal as having a cup of tea” (ibid.). Prejudices about the socio-demographics of green consumer behaviour are dispelled by the 60-80% in all income,
geographical and age groups who “care, or care a lot” about “being green”. Indeed, so statistically negligible were those who really didn’t care about being green (2%) that the report segments its consumer panel not into greens and non-greens but into six different types of green. The message could not be clearer: “everyday consumers...care, or care a lot...about being green”. Mainstream consumer demand for sustainability, it seems, has arrived.

Curiously, at just this time, influential commentators within corporate sustainability are increasingly saying the exact opposite. Commenting on his ‘Smarter Business’ blog Toby Webb, founder and chairman of Ethical Corporation notes:

“For around five or more years now, we’ve seen CEO after CEO swallow the greener/ethical' consumer marketing schtick from colleagues who perhaps might have known better. The numbers do not lie: 'ethical consumers' (I use the term in inverted commas), no matter where you look, are simply not revolutionising markets...at any kind of scale. ALL the research shows, when you cut through it, that it will be systems change at the 'top end' that delivers sustainability at scale...The latest nail in the coffin of the dreadful ethical consumer marketing canard, is the news that carbon labelling at Tesco, something many of us knew would never work at scale and in consumer communications, is dead in the water. Thank goodness for that. Now we can all get back to reality...” (Webb, 2012a)

Citing the 2012 release of the World Economic Forum’s third report in its ‘Scaling Sustainable Consumption’ initiative (WEF, 2012) as a case demonstrating the point, Webb opines:

“...consumers cannot drive this agenda.. [we] need to recognise much more overtly that solving the consumer demands conundrum is a misnomer in many ways... they will not drive the revolution needed. That’s a scary prospect to put in front of CEOs. The worry is we will turn them off.” (Webb, 2012b)

Or as Mike Barry, Head of Sustainable Business at M&S pithily put it in a (subsequently much quoted) remark at a Guardian Sustainable Business workshop in April 2011:

"No industrial revolution has been inspired by consumers marching down the street saying 'we want steam and we want it now,' 'we want the car and we want it now'. To coin Henry Ford’s words: 'If I'd listened to my customers I'd have given them a faster horse.' It's exactly the same with sustainability. People don't know what sustainability
looks like, they don't know what to demand of us, and they don't understand it when we put it on the plate.” (Guardian, 2011a)

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? On the one hand, we are told, the sovereign sustainable consumer has spoken. On the other, those committed to business sustainability are abandoning “the dreadful ethical consumer marketing canard”. Is this simply a case of survey radicals and checkout conservatives (Devinney et al., 2010)? Is it simply one group of experts celebrating ‘values’ and another taking a hard look at ‘actions’?

Both of these very different views of the sustainable consumer emanate from within the field of sustainability communications. In one, the sovereign sustainable consumer is giving the green light to companies to enable more sustainable consumption. In the other demand for sustainability is a mirage, not a ground on which to base appeals for corporate sustainability. That said the ASDA survey is in the context of a global group (WalMart) already heavily committed to sustainability initiatives; the survey is positioned as dialogue with customers over an existing trajectory rather than initiating a strategic change based on evidence of demand. It must also be seen in the context of sustainability communication’s normative project. I spoke to Solitaire Townsend, CEO of Futerra, about the report soon after its publication and for her its key importance lay in demonstrating commitment to sustainability issues across all demographic groups, challenging preconceptions that the ethical or sustainable consumer was to be found in a certain section of the middle class, and thus supporting a business case for mass as opposed to niche sustainability communications.80

The commentators taking the latter line, against the case of consumer demand, will be well aware of the avalanche of attitudinal surveys demonstrating mass support for the cause of sustainability. However, clearly for them the weekly supermarket shop does not, primarily, involve the consumer engaging a portfolio of anterior values with which to inform deliberation. Such a view, however, does not preclude consumer engagement with sustainability issues. Despite Mike Barry’s position above, M&S’ Plan A sustainability initiative was notable for the degree to which it did foreground communications to the consumer, not least in store. I would suggest that these commentators are operating with a view of the consumer closer to a practice theory understanding of social action.

---

80 Personal communication, 14/12/11.
9.5 The Role of the Consumer in Sustainable Consumption

The contemporary situation sketched out above—in which market research seems to demonstrate the widespread normalisation among ‘ordinary consumers’ of the value of ‘trying to be green’ whilst at the same time influential opinion formers in corporate sustainability disavow the significance of consumer demand—beggsthe question, what is the role of consumers in promoting sustainable consumption? In order to address that question we need to briefly return to the critique of “political consumerism” (e.g. Boström et al, 2005; Micheletti 2003) presented in Section 4.2.2. Arguing against a popular critique that represents ethical consumption as a de-politicising individualisation Micheletti and others argue that consumer activism represents legitimate political participation.

Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) question the existence of what they call the “generic active consumer model” at the core of this position, drawing attention to the empirical specificity of consumer experience and identities, especially across national boundaries (e.g. Kjaernes et al., 2007). They secondly point out that political consumerism assumes the central attribute of the consumer is choice, and contrast this with the routinised, institutionally constrained reality of “ordinary consumption” (Gronow and Warde, 2001). The consumer in political consumerism is, then, the standard model of an autonomous individual, exercising calculated choice to rationally maximise utility in the market on the basis of a personal portfolio of needs and wants. A more sociologically adequate account is what Southerton et al (2004) call “the limited autonomy of the consumer” — constrained by the collective and normative derivation of most consumption, routinely conducted within the context of resource constraints, infrastructures and material organization.

However, Jacobsen and Dulsrud’s (2007) criticism on this second point—the centrality of choice—would suggest only that political consumerism faces far greater limitations than its advocates might hope, not that it is inherently flawed as a description of a contemporary type of political practice. Individuals in the market do, after all, make rational choices to maximise utility – amongst many other things. Indeed what Jacobsen and Dulsrud’s critique perhaps misses is that, amongst the dedicated adherents of ethical consumption we find individuals unusual in their proximity to the model of the consumer making rational consumption decisions on the basis of a portfolio of ethical preferences, often on the basis of strong normative identities. That this is indeed so atypical of consumer behaviour, and thus has only marginal bearing on the challenges of sustainable consumption, informs the scepticism expressed above that ethical consumption can realistically be invoked as the motor for driving sustainable consumption to appropriate scale.
More importantly, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) and Barnett et al. (2011) point out that in focusing on consumer attitudes and values we lose sight of the strategic efforts of collective actors aimed at markets and regulation, and how those actors frame and mobilise consumers.

The role of collective actors in mobilizing ‘the consumer’ for strategic interventions and the question of the locus of agency between a hypostatized consumer and those collective actors was neatly illustrated in the following interview extract. Here, a senior researcher in a consumer activist NGO discusses a piece of consultancy work for a corporate client to inform the client’s consumer-facing sustainability communications strategy:

“I came back to say to them that their public reporting of...carbon was weak and they came back saying what has that got to do with communication with the consumer? ...you know...what we stick on the package was more [important] ....and I gave them I suppose a reasoned response...that [...] we know that consumers’ associations... can smell a rat and spot a decent response and they then articulate that [to the consumer]..it’s a theme there in that dialogue really...why do you need all this stuff for the consumer, it’s for the regulator? You know I don’t buy that because ultimately consumers have their intermediaries...who are Friends of the Earth, or ourselves. That’s worth their [consultancy fee]. [laughs]” (KI-5)

In this instance the NGO was approached on the basis of its expert knowledge of ‘the sustainable consumer’. The NGO researcher mobilised a sophisticated understanding of the field of intervention, making the point that the client needed to understand that ‘the consumer’ is primarily addressed and mobilised through intermediaries such as the NGO itself and that successful communications would be addressed to such a reality rather than to autonomous sovereign consumers. What is particularly interesting in this instance is that both the corporate client and the NGO seek to mobilise ‘the consumer’. The NGO, while drawing the client’s attention to the role played by activist and advocate intermediaries in this field of interventions, is simultaneously one of those intermediaries making just such an intervention through its advocacy.

This excursion is not intended to imply consumption activism alone is the context in which sustainability communications, and far less, corporate sustainability, are to be understood. There are of course other factors that are at play in the widespread adoption of corporate sustainability programmes; from social networks and processes of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) to the ubiquitous mediatisation of the sustainability crisis.
But whatever the balance of the hugely complex forces at play it is clear that the normative project of ethical consumption (understood widely) has the greatest salience for the conceptualising of a ‘sustainable consumer’ – even if perhaps we are at the point where the discourse of corporate sustainability and the consumer it imagines frees itself of the “ethical consumer marketing canard”.

Building on Barnett et al.’s (2011) position I suggest that to understand the field of commercial sustainability communications we need to address it in terms of collective actors (communications agencies, NGOs, corporations) which have come to share a problematised understanding of consumption inherent in the discourse of sustainability. Corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption (which I address in the following chapter) represents the adoption by brand owners of the rationality of problematisation formerly mobilised against them.

Barnett et al suggest:

“[E]thical consumption initiatives deploy information for two purposes: first, to generate narratives in both the public sphere and in everyday life, in order to encourage debate about issues...and, second, to establish the legitimacy of organizations as representatives of popular concern on these issues.” (2011:21)

Similarly, corporate sustainability communications generate brand associations through narratives in the “promotional public sphere” (Knight, 2010) and in everyday life in order to establish the legitimacy of brands as intermediaries of sustainability concerns, and as enablers of change addressing those concerns – whether personal pro-environmental behaviour change, improvements in the conditions of distant others, or the amelioration of environmental impacts (see Section 10.4). The extent to which we might find the model of this citizen-consumer of extended ethical responsibilities in operation in corporate sustainability communications is an index of the extent to which the problematisation of consumption has colonised corporate understanding. It is not therefore that business primarily responds to the effective demand of the sustainable consumer but that strategic efforts to instantiate the sustainable consumer aim to legitimate brands as articulators, interlocutors and facilitators of citizen-consumer concerns.

What kind of consumer is so deployed is not fixed. As Barnett et al. note the notion of ‘consumer choice’ and the sovereign consumer that comes with it may be tactically deployed (2011:21).

Drawing on Barnett et al. we can characterise the discourse of sustainability as articulating the consumer as an ethical subject embedded in a globalised network of responsibility shared with governments, corporation and other agencies, extending outwards to distant others, environmental
impacts, intergeneration equity and so forth. Indeed much of the contemporary politics of sustainability concerns the appropriate distribution of responsibility between consumers, governments, corporations and so on. I refer to this subject as the citizen-consumer.

Where does this leave us? We have identified the portfolio model of action which underlies the sovereign consumer. We have also identified an alternative model—the citizen-consumer—which is the consumer of a problematised consumption to greater or lesser extent taken up in the discourse of corporate sustainability. Barnett et al further suggest that if “new actors [are produced] in the public realm this need not take the form of fully formed elaborations of self at all” but rather “singularities—a purchase, an investment, a donation— that can be registered, recorded and reiterated through circuits of communications” (2011: 108). Ironically given the stereotype of the fastidiously moral ‘ethical consumer’ running through their portfolio of concerns before seeking to maximise ethical utility in their purchase decision, Barnett et al. locate the product of ethical consumption campaigns in the distributed, calculable act. This explains something about the character of the sustainable consumer—a being oscillating between the mobilised sovereign (green) consumer, the citizen-consumer of the problematised consumption and the disembodied, diffuse, singularity of calculable sustainability.

9.6 Sustainability Communications and the Consumer

For many practitioners within the field of sustainability communications the consumer is a distant figure, rarely, if ever, approached. There is a tendency for marketing communications addressed directly at the consumer to remain in the orbit of mainstream advertising and marketing, although not exclusively. Consumers are more often addressed by sustainability communications as part of communications around corporate sustainability initiatives and activities rather than direct product or service marketing.

It is not unusual for corporations to have a number of different communication agencies on their roster and specialist sustainability communications agencies are less likely to be deployed in consumer-facing communications. One former brand manager of a major UK firm, an advocate of sustainability, described his struggles to address the consumer with sustainability messaging:

“[In the brand team] we only controlled the formal elements of the design system, and when it came to advertising we’d fight the lines of business funding the advertising over brand versus sales targets. So we’d have a total war. We’d work with [other business functions] on a roster of agencies. We had AMV for consumer, and a lead business
agency, which for most of the time was St. Lukes, and usually one or two other small ad agencies. So [St. Lukes’] were quite green – AMV the big consumer agency were not green at all. They wouldn’t have any green in any ads. It wasn’t part of it.” (KI-3)

There is also a certain wariness in the field regarding direct consumer communications, with several key informants stressing how easy it is to get sustainability-related messages to consumers wrong. Practitioners are acutely aware of the “sustainability liability” (Luchs et al 2010)—the potential for sustainability related consumer messaging to backfire and create negative connotations—and of perceptions of greenwash.

This has led the phenomenon dubbed ‘green muting’, where companies actively decide not to communicate their sustainability credentials and initiatives through consumer-facing marketing communications. The phenomenon is quite widespread. I asked John Grant, one of my key informants and a high profile figure in green marketing, why he had advised IKEA when working on their, very credible, sustainability programme not to promote it to the public at all.

“...Because they aren’t green. They are a slightly less bad global retailer. Well more than slightly - their sustainability efforts are impressive...[but] you don’t do ads saying ‘fewer people got food poisoning in our canteens this year’ - so why would you do ads saying ‘our carbon intensity is getting lower?’” (KI-14)

‘The consumer’ is often spoken of by practitioners as cynical, poorly informed and indifferent. One key informant, an agency Creative Director closely involved in marketing communications, repeatedly cited a study which demonstrated “only 18% of claims in marketing are believed, that goes down to 14% when it involves the environment” (KI-15). The head of sustainability at a corporate communications agency commented simply: “There’s no consumer demand” (KI-11).

However, this tended to be a view of ‘the consumer’, which did not reflect a general pessimism over people’s engagement with sustainability issues. The same head of sustainability also commented: “I’m an optimist basically, and I think people want to do the right and they know it’s the right thing – it’s just getting them to do it” (KI-11). Rather it was an admission that the opportunities to engage people around sustainability were deeply limited by the nature of both the communicative context in which people are approached as consumers, and the multiple complexities and demands at play in the act of purchasing. Another key informant, a CSR communications consultant, discussing the appropriate communication channels for corporate sustainability messaging commented:
“That debate [about values] has to be had but I’m not sure having it with consumers is the right way to do it though... I think there should be an opportunity [for consumers] to get involved in, to explore values based thinking, discussion, ideas about whether they want to reduce their impact, on the other hand I don’t think the place to that is when they’re shopping.” (KI-4)

Thus the institutional organisation of the commercial communications field and the strategic advice of practitioners themselves often militate against sustainability communications engaging consumers qua consumers. This distance from the figure of the consumer is perhaps a reason that sustainability communications is relatively unencumbered by presuppositions about consumption, indeed I would suggest that the field routinely engages in projects where the underlying assumptions about consumption are closer to the practice approach to consumption, where ordinary consumption is generally a moment in practices integral to everyday life (Warde, 2005).

By way of example I turn to ‘Amanda’ (pictured overleaf). Amanda is a ‘concept design’, that is to say not the design output of a communication project but a design deployed in the process of the project to exemplify what the practitioners hope to achieve. Concept designs are a useful way of looking at practitioners’ understandings and desires before these have to be mediated and negotiated with clients, budgets and other restrictions.

The Amanda design was deployed as a concept in a project at the Agency during my fieldwork. The brief from the client company was simple – they wanted to increase the number employees at the head office cycling to work.

The Agency had a lot of experience with sustainable transport projects and suggested to the client that a known barrier to the uptake of urban commuter cycling was confidence in negotiating busy urban streets. Research known to the team suggested women in particular cited cycling confidence as a reason not to commute by bike. The Agency had therefore proposed that the cornerstone of the programme should be cycling skills workshops, to be conducted by a cycling advocacy group that the Agency had previously commissioned. The communication challenge was to promote the widest possible uptake of the workshops.

Amanda (actually a design from a US cycling campaign) was deployed by the account manager in an early brainstorming session to exemplify the sensibility that he wanted the cycling workshop communication to embody. Some discussion was held around the design, but much of the general approval was tacit. The design was “sexy”. The shared understanding of why the image was “sexy”
was that it presented cycling in the city as young, attractive and fashionable – but in a very normal, unthreatening way. The CO$_2$ saved statement went unremarked. The small icons detail “Amanda’s weekly savings: 33 mins $25 14 lbs of CO$_2$” elicited a response of “that’s nice”, indicating the ordering of time first, then money, then CO$_2$.

Further reasons for liking the ‘concept’ were elicited:

“I like she’s not wearing a helmet because you know it’s really off putting messing your hair up – especially if this is commuting.” (Graphic designer, female)

“It’s a lovely bike. She’s nicely dressed. Nothing too much. You’d want to be this sort of woman.” (Junior account manager, female)

The account manager commented he liked the way the shoes complemented the bike. The shared response of the team could be summed up that the image said: Smart, attractive, modern, healthy women cycle to work – and look it doesn’t even need to mess up your hair. It
suggested an attractive lifestyle, but also a normal lifestyle, in which cycling to work was a part.

I relay this example because what is absent from it is any sense of starting from a perspective of pro-environmental values. The environmental message is there, but almost as an assumed background. The project represented a practice oriented response to a sustainability issue. The core of the project did not involve pro-environmental messaging, it engaged with a known weak point for the uptake of commuter cycling – the sense of competence to deal with urban traffic. The concept design image placed the practice of commuter cycling in the context of the practices of everyday life - other commuting practices, and self-presentation. Amanda’s bike, shoes, bag and dress ‘went together’ – a Diderot unity in McCracken’s (1988) terms, a group of consumer goods with an internal consistency to a lifestyle, but one ratcheting consumption down, not up. The campaign was not conceived in terms of inculcating pro-environmental values but as recruitment to a pro-environmental practice; indeed the environmental element of the message was consciously muted to allow the other connotations to have best effect. In the case of the small icons the CO₂ figure is purposefully placed last; money saved is foregrounded, enabling the message to convey understanding of everyday priorities as well as normalise the calculation of carbon footprints, placing it in the common sense register of saving money and saving time.

We can see in the cycling project certain modes through which sustainability communications can seek to instantiate the sustainable consumer. Firstly, the strategy of the cycling project is enabling - it practically seeks to address an element of the practice concerned which militates against realising the sustainability gain which the practice holds out; in this case, a sense of confidence in urban cycling. Secondly, there is a didactic element; the concept design shows the amount of CO₂ that can be saved by the cycling commute and introduces the idea of the carbon footprint of everyday practices. Thirdly, in their appraisal of Amanda, the practitioners are drawing on their own sensibilities - a design-conscious aesthetic, an environmental ethic conceived as part of a young, fashionable lifestyle and so on. We might regard this last mode as reflexive.

It is analytically useful to separate these modes out. Together with one further mode they represent the key modes through which sustainability communications seeks to instantiate the sustainable consumer.
9.7 Modes of Instantiation

I suggest there are four key modes of instantiation which we can treat as analytically separate: enabling; didactic; reflexive; and advocative segmentation. These modes emerge from the interactions of the strategic aims of sustainability communications, its clients and other intermediaries and involve engagements with different arrangements of actors, interests and practices. In practice they may be combined, interlaced or even possibly conflict.

9.7.1 Enabling

The enabling mode is oriented by the communicative task of operationalising the sustainability benefit built into the product, service or initiative through the consumer’s action. Such sustainability benefits may be entirely dependent on the communication campaign being effective in changing consumer practices. The increasing prevalence of communications in this mode can be ascribed to the sustainability initiatives of a number of multinationals, notably Proctor & Gamble and Unilever, extending beyond their own operational impacts to quantify the environmental impacts of everyday consumption.

Probably the best known of such communication projects is Proctor & Gamle’s Ariel “Turn to 30°C” campaign launched in 2006. Having reformulated Ariel washing powder to wash effectively at 30°C degrees, promising considerable energy savings, the campaign encouraged consumers to wash at 30°C rather than the higher temperature settings habitually used. The campaign, which won a UK Marketing Society ‘Award for Excellence’ in 2008 for its effectiveness81 relied on an integrated campaign across TV and print advertising, direct marketing, Internet campaigns, in-store events and promotional activities to target a mass audience – as well as, considered crucial for its success, product packaging (WARC, 2012). Explicit environmental messaging was avoided, with energy saving messaging adapted in the international campaign to specific cultural contexts. In short, it deployed a standard marketing understanding of the consumer to produce a full multi-channel communication campaign.

Additionally Proctor & Gamble partnered with national climate change and energy saving organisations—the Energy Saving Trust in the UK—to promote the Ariel Energy Saving Promise, an awareness raising campaign with pledging, competitions and so on; a standard appeal to citizen-consumer sensibilities (BITC, 2008).

81 An IPSOS survey reported that 17% of UK households washed at 30°C, up from 2% of households in their 2002 survey (WBCSD, 2009)
Such corporate initiatives, while entirely dependent on the voluntaristic behaviour of individuals for their success, could be said to involve an understanding of the limited autonomy of the consumer (Southerton et al., 2004). Recognising that behaviour is heavily scripted by material artefacts and devices they address these conditions and seek to intervene in consumption practices to realise the sustainability benefits thus enabled.

Fig. 14: Patagonia advertisement in New York Times 25/11/11.

Other enabling campaigns appeal directly to the citizen-consumer. On 25th November 2011, Patagonia, an outdoor clothing brand strongly associated with environmentalism, placed a full page advert in the New York Times with the strap-line “Don’t Buy This Jacket”, launching its ‘Common Threads Initiative’. Unsurprisingly the campaign received a lot of media coverage, however Patagonia’s widely lauded sustainability commitments meant that environmental and campaign groups generally responded to the campaign as one of good faith. The company’s credibility as a facilitator of citizen-consumer concerns is underscored by its recent conversion to a novel US not-for profit legal form, the benefit corporation (Tozzi, 2012).

The campaign is an object lesson in the dialogic possibilities of consumer co-production of brand value (see Section 2.4.3), asking the consumer to commit to a series of pledges met by the company:

---

82 In the USA the date is popularly known as “Black Friday”, the date that launches the Christmas shopping season and anecdotally the first day of the year that retailers turn an overall profit. The date has for many years also been the focus of the anti-consumerism campaigners under the banner “Buy Nothing Day”.

166
“REDUCE: We make useful gear that lasts a long time. YOU don’t buy what you don’t need. REPAIR: We help you repair your Patagonia gear. YOU pledge to fix what’s broken”

Fig. 16 Website pledge between company and citizen-consumer. Source: www.patagonia.com/eu/enGB/common-threads

I do not therefore make an equation between particular models of the consumer and specific modes of instantiation. Rather, we see here different understandings of the consumer emerge from different contexts in which the problematisation of consumption is articulated by different actors, interests, constraints and qualifications.

9.7.2 Reflexive

While most commercial communications work involves accommodation to the values and motivations of focus group participants and survey respondents and the purposing of messages and styles to the tastes of assumed audiences and consumer segments, the holy grail of for practitioners is to be freed of such constraint to engage in aesthetic and technical innovation. It is in this ideal, rarely realised, that the presumed power of cultural intermediaries lies to play avant garde to consumer capitalism (Bourdieu, 1984: 356) and instantiate its own mores, predilections and aesthetic sensibility in cultural production (Du Gay, 1997). I take this mode to encompass such reflexive endeavours. As Slater and Tonkiss’ suggest:
“...if postmodernization has become a recognizable feature of modern marketing and consumption, this is at least partly attributable to the way in which knowledge worker or cultural intermediaries market goods to themselves as consumers, or to ‘virtual consumers’ constructed in their own image.” (2001: 178)

The mode is strongly informed by brand management and design practices; specifically in sustainability communications it concerns the simultaneous realisation of axes of aesthetic and ethical value, as discussed in Chapter Five. Strongly reflexive sustainability communications are not common, perhaps because of a certain conservatism around the sensibility associated with sustainability and concern that sustainability messaging should not appear too close to more aesthetically and design conscious forms of advertising, with their connotations of ‘consumerism’.

A good example that breaks the mould is Nike’s ‘Better World’ campaign, produced by US advertising agency Wieden + Kennedy. The campaign website (http://nikebetterworld.com) uses innovative HTML5 web technology to introduce Nike’s sustainability efforts and links to a number of ‘Better World’ YouTube videos. The campaign’s launch video has been created by editing together footage of previous Nike adverts, enabling the opening line “This film is made from 100% recycled ads” and placing it firmly in a postmodern, intertextual register (Nike, 2011a). The initiative also seeks very consciously to build kudos with design-oriented and technology audiences through opening up data in the Nike Materials Sustainability Index to open source software developers with the aim of making this data freely useable by apparel designers (Nike, 2011b).

That the campaign fits the criteria of the reflexive mode is demonstrated by its lauding in creative sustainability communications circles, as this comment on a sustainability design blog attests:

“If you want to see how sustainable communication should be done, look no further than Nike’s Better World campaign...when it comes to marketing and communication Nike are one of the kings of cool and they have injected that cool into their sustainable comms brilliantly...It ticks all the boxes of great (sustainable) communications and shows the mainstream how green should be done.” (Maduma, 2011)

The consumer here, then, is the expressive consumer, engaged in identity construction from the symbolic, aesthetic and cultural resources provided by commercial communications and their channelling of affect to commodities (Holt, 2002); and again, in this process lies the potential of consumer co-production of brand value (Arvidsson, 2005; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Zwick et al, 2008)
9.7.3 Didactic

The didactic mode is perhaps the commonest form in sustainability communications, and receives the most criticism from within the field. I do not include here the huge body of informational communication contained in sustainability reporting as the modes concern communications addressed to consumers, but undoubtedly this wealth of technical detail has militated towards much didactic communication.

The appeal of didactic communication to commercial communications is obvious – understanding sustainability issues involves a broad range of often complex and technical issues. It is not that there is widespread faith amongst mainstream brands that provision of information leads to behavioural change, rather that consumer understanding of sustainability is a pre-requisite for brands to realise value from consumers for their sustainability engagements. For sustainability to serve a function in brands’ appeals to authenticity consumers have to value sustainability.

Thus brands have enthusiastically joined the efforts of ethical consumption campaigners in weaving narratives of sustainable consumption in the public sphere. Even supermarkets have joined the ranks of what Miller and Rose call “those little engineers of the human soul” (2008: 5) to inculcate the novel virtues and knowledges of the citizen-consumer. To use the example as ASDA again, we find on its website an environment blog addressing readers with sustainability issues related to everyday purchases, sometimes through discussing ongoing operational processes, such as the difficulties of sourcing certified sustainable palm oil, at other time offering consumer advice, on for example how to minimise food waste (ASDA, 2012a).

This didactic mode assumes the level of strategy. We find, for example, Tesco’s 2011 CSR report declaring: “Our role is to show customers that living greener lives can be attractive and affordable.” Here it is not even the environmental impacts related to the products purchased through the retailer that are at issue, the company assumes a civic didactic responsibility to address citizens’ impacts in their entirety:

“In the UK we know that our customers’ carbon footprint is around 100 times greater than Tesco’s direct carbon footprint, so we have a real opportunity to tackle climate change by mobilising our customers to make small changes that add up to a big difference. In 2009 we made a commitment to help our customers halve their carbon footprints by 2020.” (Tesco, 2011: 28)
One form of didactic sustainability communications contributes to erecting an informational interface of sustainability metrics in the public sphere through which consumer and brand may relate. Thus, for example, Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan website provides various devices which calculate sustainability impacts of product lifecycles from production, through distribution to consumer use.

![Product Analyser on Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan website](https://www.sustainable-living.unilever.com)

*Fig. 17 Product Analyser on Unilever’s Sustainable Living Plan website shows greenhouse gas emissions from production, distribution and consumer use or household products. Source: www.sustainable-living.unilever.com*

The didactic mode sees commercial communications join ethical consumption campaigns and other media sources in inculcating a common understanding of problematised consumption and thus the model of the citizen-consumer.

**9.7.4 Advocative Segmentation**

The mode *not* at play in the example of Amanda above is perhaps the most important for sustainability communications as a whole. This mode is oriented by the market research device of consumer segmentation and has been championed in public sustainability communications policy (see Darnton and Sharp, 2006). For many marketers practices of segmentation are at the heart of sustainability communications.
marketing practice (McDonald, 2011). Consumer segmentation includes a broad range of techniques, from extremely sophisticated software techniques working on datasets of geodemographic information (see Burrows and Gane, 2006) and actual purchase behaviour, amounting to a form of surveillance (Pridmore and Lyon 2011), to ethnographic analysis (Sunderland and Denny 2011), and large scale surveys, as well as much more primitive and ad hoc bundling of presumed consumer motivations, attitudes and behaviours. One of my key informants, Chris Arnold, creative director of an ‘ethical marketing agency’ refers to such ad hoc segmentation techniques as “astrology” (Arnold, 2009: 99). The more sophisticated segmentation techniques amount to what has been called a form of commercial sociology (Burrows and Gane, 2006; Savage and Burrows, 2007; Pridmore and Lyon, 2011; cf. Callon, 2002).

Such resource intensive work is less available as an everyday technique for the smaller agencies which characteristically compose the field of sustainability communications, and therefore when segmentation is employed by them tends to be either in a more ad hoc and impressionistic manner, the use of publicly available segmentation models and\or data, or less commonly purchased proprietary data (again, access costs are high). Thus during my fieldwork at the Agency a segmentation model was only deployed once in the projects in which I engaged, and that simply drew on a publicly available model of motivational segmentation. Undoubtedly with the entry of the major communications groups into the field advocative segmentation has become a more prevalent mode (one such example is discussed below).

As with mainstream marketing, advocative segmentation is used to inform the development of propositions and key messages appropriate to different segments as well as select and exclude segments as target audiences from specific projects. Sustainability communications may even operate with the concept of ‘product’ when engaged in, for example, behaviour change programmes.

83 Market segmentation and consumer segmentation can be separated. Market segmentation starts from an analysis of the market structure and works down towards relevant consumer segments based on needs before asking about the characteristics of those consumers. Consumer segmentation starts from an a priori set of variables—generally demographic and psychographic—to cluster groups of consumers (see McDonald, 2011). Advocative segmentation is therefore profoundly different to market segmentation proper but only subtly different from a priori consumer segmentation.

84 Sunderland and Denny (2011) provide an account of the complex ‘slippage’ between segmentation models and segmentation practices and the complex of relations that occurs around the construction and maintenance of consumer segmentation models.

85 For example Platt and Retallack (2009) explicitly set out to research messaging to a specific segment based on Cultural Dynamics’ motivational segmentation model, discussed below.

171
the alternative behaviour (such as cycling to work) is conceived as the ‘product’ to be marketed. What is distinctive is the normative aspect of sustainability communications, such that segmentation is used for both instrumental and advocative ends. What is different therefore is that, when practiced normatively, ‘the product’ is framed in a larger advocative communicational goal – the promotion of sustainability per se. However, almost ubiquitously in sustainability communications the premise is that ‘the product’ takes radical precedence over the sustainability frame, such that the frame may even disappear completely if practitioners consider the immediate communicative goal is compromised by it.  

Indeed, this pragmatic orientation of privileging the immediate communicative goal, which commercial sustainability communications shares with social marketing, is the source of controversy in the wider field of sustainability communications and thus marks a disputed legitimacy to this form of instantiation, as noted in Section 6.3. To recap, the dispute is between those (based largely in NGO communications) who advocate a values-focused sustainability communications to “motivate systemic behavioural change” (CCCAG, 2010: 4) and those advocating a pragmatic model (largely based in commercial sustainability communications). The claim of the former is that communications deploying advocative segmentation are agnostic to the question of cultural values and thus instrumentally exploit values, behaviours and motivations for their immediate goal even where these “may conflict with other, broader goals” of systemic cultural and political change (ibid.). Of the many difficulties with this position the salient one to note here is the assumption that commercial practitioners are indifferent to sources of conflict between the immediate, tactical goals of the communication and the strategic goals of the normative sustainability project – an assumption I would argue is not supported by observation. Rather, most sustainability communications practice involves negotiating ‘the product’ with the sustainability frame.

The consumer in segmentation techniques is often a composite character drawing on multiple forms of understanding: socio-economic; geo-demographic; purchase behaviour; response to previous marketing and so. In advocative segmentation it is often the consumer’s relation to sustainability specifically (and conceived in multiple ways) which determines the segmentation. Thus the ASDA report *Green is Normal* (ASDA, 2011) invoked earlier in this chapter marshals a segmentation of ASDA customers into six types “in terms of how they look at sustainability and green living”: from Green Messengers …the classic, traditional ‘ethical consumers’”; to “Good Deal Greens…driven by value as well as values” (2011: 2). In a sense this is a striking example of *advocative segmentation* –

86 I have referred to this previously as the “sustainability liability” (see Luchs et al, 2010).
for the authors of this report there is no segment outside of a relation to “sustainability and green living” only different relations to it, different levels of engagement with “values”, open to different avenues of influence (“Family Green are much more likely to be influenced by their friends and family to be green than they are by public figures”), and different amenability to communication (“‘Warm and fuzzy’ green claims bring out their sceptical side”) (ibid.).

Within this mode, then, there are different, often complementary, ways of understanding the consumer – for example primarily sociological or primarily psychological. It could be argued that segmentation techniques presuppose a portfolio model of action, segmenting by distributions of values, attitudes, beliefs and motivations. But I would sound a note of caution here, especially with conflating this underlying ontology with the presumption that it is therefore the sovereign consumer that they imagine. Firstly, the tendency to segment by relation to “sustainability and green living” tends to position the subject of consumption as what I have called above the citizen-consumer, the consumer imagined as a node within chains of responsibility extending out to society and the natural world. Secondly, where the sociology of sustainable consumption identifies the portfolio model as problematic is as adequate to an explanation of consumption. It is important to remember that what concerns us here is communication and we should not jump from one to the other. Multiple models of the consumer may be deployed within a single campaign, and as we have seen sustainability communications often involves strategic advice on ‘the product’ (such as the cycling skills workshop noted above) which may implicitly involve a practice orientated view of the consumer, whilst deploying other models at the communication stage. Furthermore, as Whitford (2002) notes, it is the “paradigmatic privilege” accorded the portfolio model which is at issue; once displaced from the realm of ontology “rational choice and other portfolio theories do have their place in the social scientist’s theoretical toolbox” (2002:355). Within the deliberative contexts towards which much communication is addressed such models may be unproblematic.

87 I make no claim as to the theory of action this model of the consumer presupposes, simply that this model is not the sovereign consumer.

88 As the Agency’s CEO put it: “…a good marketing team and marketing director is as involved in the product as doing the selling. So all of your focus groups and all of your working out and all is as much to do with getting the product right as it is what you put on the ad or the poster and that maps across to [sustainability communications really well...it takes you in two directions, first of all there’s a huge comms challenge...call to action, switch required . And then there’s product, i.e. the alternative you’re asking people to switch....strategy and comms are intertwined.” (KI-12)
Before moving on I want to briefly give two examples of advocative segmentation, both for illustrative purposes and because they exemplify two distinct types, which we might call the campaign-oriented and the commercial-oriented. Both also have particular resonance with wider issues in the thesis.

The first is the motivational grouping typology developed by Cultural Dynamics Strategy & Marketing (CDSM). CDSM occupy the pragmatic side of the controversy over values in sustainability communications noted above. The CDSM model, widely used both by campaign groups and in commercial marketing, is a segmentation model of motivational types which can be operationalised to examine dynamics of social change. Cultural norms, understandings and kinds of behaviour do not therefore determine the segmentation but their diffusion throughout society over time can be mapped across different segments.

The second example I want to give, by contrast, is focused specifically on understanding consumer attitudes to sustainability and social issues in the context of firms and their brands. The Sustainable Futures project was developed in 2009 by global communications group Havas and sustainability-focused research company Globescan (Champniss and Vila, 2010) and led into the development of its 2011 launch of the proprietary Meaningful Brands Index (Havas Media, 2012). The Sustainable Futures project involved survey research with 25,000 consumers over nine countries, measuring expressed levels of concern over social and environmental issues, attitudes towards the role of business in addressing such issues, as well as purchase and boycotting behaviour, and attitudes to specific brands. The segmentation model produces clusters on two axes – engagement with “issues” and propensity to engage with the issues through consumer behaviour towards firms, or “activism” (Champniss and Vila, 2010: 32-40).

Where the CDSM campaign-oriented model maps the dynamics of sustainable consumer behavioural patterns across social space, and informs advocative projects of diffusing those behaviours, the Havas model maps the possibilities for brands to instantiate the sustainable consumer by recruiting consumers from the “issue space” of the model to the “activism space” in which brands are given legitimacy to articulate and facilitate citizen-consumer concerns.

According to the latter’s proponents, on the one side:

“Consumers want to be authentically enabled – not just as consumers but as citizens” (ibid: 42)

89 See www.cultdyn.co.uk, viewed 01/08/12
And on the other:

“Brands become more meaningful when they help us all—as individuals—achieve lasting, positive outcomes that enhance our sense of personal wellbeing.” (Havas Media, 2012)

The Sustainable Futures\Meaningful Brands project can therefore be seen to provide resources to brands for co-production with the consumer, drawing on sustainability as the key resource.

9.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that commercial sustainability communications operates with diffuse models of the consuming subject which we should not assume consistently reproduce the sustainable consumer in the model of the sovereign consumer. We find also a subject of consumption akin to the practice theory model, as well as calculable singularities and the citizen-consumer of problematised consumption. It is important to acknowledge that the subject of consumption is more often as not addressed not in terms of ‘the consumer’ at all, but as the employee or the citizen; in so doing we implicitly challenge overly simplistic accounts of marketisation and commodification in contemporary culture. However, where the subject of consumption is addressed as ‘the consumer’ it tends to default to the portfolio model of the sovereign consumer.

I identify four modes—enabling, didactic, reflexive and advocative segmentation—through which sustainability communications attempts to instantiate the sustainable consumer and explore how these are enacted. Finally, I suggest that organisational actors within the field of sustainability communications act as cultural intermediaries of sustainability through articulating these framings of the consumer and thus of sustainable consumption, often in the pursuit of the normative project in which they are engaged.
Chapter Ten: Brand and Sustainability

10.1 Introduction

In Section 2.4 I examined recent sociological theorisation of brands and branding and in Section 4.4 the rise of branding as part of the genealogy of sustainability communications. In this chapter I will explore three key ways in which brand and sustainability are related through contemporary business discourse and practice and in which sustainability communications play an important role.

I explore how the sustainability communications complex is articulated in wider contexts, and with larger scale phenomena, which ultimately link it to political economy. In Chapter Three I framed my research questions in terms of what Marcus (1998) calls the “multi-sited ethnographic research imaginary”: which calls for the “tracing and describing of connections and relationships among sites...providing its own contexts of significance” (Marcus 1998: 14). By tracing links beyond a single, bounded site to a wider field this “research imaginary” seeks to be sensitive to issues of power and examine the articulation of micro and macro processes (ibid.; cf. Burawoy, 1991: 5-6).

Each of the three phenomena I address is, in Schatzki’s terms, a site of sustainability communications: a context in which it occurs, and of which it is a constituent part:

“A site is a special sort of context, the strongest...For it is the one type where entities are intrinsically part of their own context.” (Schatzki, 2002: 65)

In each phenomenon, sustainability communications is imbricated with branding practices and we can discern processes of cultural intermediation. Each ultimately connects sustainability communications to issues of political economy. Necessarily, in shifting to this scale, a level of granularity of the practices of sustainability communications is obscured.

In Section 10.2 I unpack an increasingly important business discourse concerning the relation between brand and sustainability. I call this the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption. I argue that it provides an emerging ethical project for commercial communications as a whole. We can discern in the history of commercial communications two previous such projects, discussed below. The historical and contemporary examples each emerge in the context of cultural and economic transformation or crisis, and accompany transformations in the everyday practices and institutional arrangements of the commercial communications industry.
In Section 10.3 I address how sustainability has entered into the “cultural politics of work” (Fleming, 2009) through the medium of brand. Here sustainability is mobilised by corporate capitalism as a legitimating discourse. In Section 10.4 I examine how brands have become vectors for the articulation of citizen-consumer concerns about sustainability in the “promotional public sphere” (Knight, 2010). Here, sustainability communications is caught up in a globalised public sphere in which corporations and social movement actors relate agonistically over sustainability. Section 10.3, therefore, concerns subjects primarily as workers and Section 10.4 concerns subjects primarily as citizen-consumers.

Before approaching these three sites I introduce below the role of brand in sustainability communications and offer a conceptual clarification on the use of the term.

### 10.1.1 Brand and Commercial Sustainability Communications

Even a cursory survey of the service offerings of agencies in the field would demonstrate the importance of brand and branding to sustainability communications. Indeed, some agencies in the field began as mainstream design, and then brand, agencies—SalterBaxter, for example (KI-6)—while the new dedicated sustainability divisions of the major communication groups are often hybrids with existing branding services (e.g. OgilvyEarth).

Equally, on the client side, sustainability communications are often regarded as an adjunct to brand communications. In the motivations to mobilise them ‘brand enhancement’ and brand related functions rank highly. The table below reports the views of “senior corporate communications executives, marketing and sustainability experts” in a survey conducted by business analysis firm Verdantix (Verdantix, 2012).  

---

*Footnote:* I am grateful to Verdantix for provision gratis of this proprietary report. Verdantix is an international “independent analyst firm focused on energy, environment and sustainability” (www.verdantix.com).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand enhancement</strong></td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improve corp. reputation</strong></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competitive differentiation</strong></td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Customer information demand</strong></td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stakeholder information demand</strong></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increase revenue</strong></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. “What are the key reasons for communicating your sustainability initiatives?” Source: Verdantix (2012)*

However, it is important to point out the complex and agonistic relations between the two. Academic commentators often present a picture in which brand and sustainability are articulated together with relative ease (e.g. Fleming, 2009; Knight, 2010; Moor and Lury, 2011); perhaps assuming a malleability to brand that would not be recognised by practitioners.

Rather, the difficulties of ‘brand\sustainability (or CSR) integration’ are a constant topic for practitioners. As one of my key informants, a brand manager in a blue chip company explained:

"It *is* hard to integrate because, I mean, *is* our entire raison d’etre *really* to make the world a better place? No... Loveable, over-protective mum, cheery cockney taxi driver – that’s our brand spirit. I mean [the Chief Sustainability Officer] is wanting to try and integrate the brand and CSR messages into one, by trying to pretend we’re all happy clappy, that everything we do is trying to make the world a better place. I mean it’s just
not credible is it?...I don't think [CSR and brand] should stand separate but it’s almost impossible for most big companies to put them front and centre. We've been doing some great [sustainability] stuff for years but trying to fit this square sustainability peg into a round brand hole...not least is inelegant and naïve. And you can look like an idiot really quickly.” (KI-10)

This language of ‘fit’—or lack of—is commonplace. Another informant, a brand and sustainability strategy consultant, articulated the problem thus:

“CSR can never be the driving force for brand, because it’s fundamentally different...Where most businesses don’t do a good job is they have various campaigns and initiatives at the brand level that are outputs of a strategic process but also you have sustainability things which are outputs of a strategic process and the trouble is you then take those outputs and try and make them work with the brand and you end with glorified labelling on packaging – it’s the wrong bit of kit, it’s forcing machinery onto another bit of machinery that doesn’t fit.” (KI-7)

Sustainability communication practitioners routinely acknowledge the difficulty of articulating the complex issues of sustainability within the context of brand and marketing communications:

“Communications thrives on newness and actually this stuff requires repetition and exploration of complexity, which is actually very hard for a mainstream brand to do.”

(Head of Sustainability, corporate communications agency, KI-11)

Practitioners are acutely aware of the pitfalls of mobilising sustainability in marketing and brand communication, more often invoking a generalised consumer cynicism towards corporate claims than the enthusiasm for brands implied in some academic accounts. As discussed in Section 6.3, managing the problem of greenwash—rather than exploiting environmental claims—is a central project of commercial sustainability communications. Sustainability communications practitioners recognise distinct limitations to the articulation of sustainability and brand. It is the very difficulty of successfully meshing sustainability with brand communication that provides one of sustainability communications’ claims to expertise.
10.1.2 Brand and Sustainability: a Conceptual Clarification

I use the terms ‘brand’ and ‘sustainability’ here as short-hands. Brand refers to a practice-order complex (see Section 2.2) which includes not only communication practices (that produce ‘visual identity’ for example) but to other practices that have become imbricated with branding, such as, inter alia, business strategy, employee engagement programmes, or product design. To recall Lury: “[t]o assume the brand is a single thing would be to mistake the multiple and sometimes divergent layers of activity that have gone into producing the brand…the object of the brand is defined by knowledge practices: those it partakes of and those that take place within it” (2004:16).

Sustainability in this context refers to the whole complex of corporate sustainability\(^91\)—everything from the commissioning of energy systems, to social audits in supply chains, to providing bicycle storage for employees—as well as those aspects of sustainable consumption to which that complex relates.

Both terms refer to relatively mobile meanings and understandings. Such that, firstly, the discourses that invoke them can carve out new territory and jurisdiction: brand can come to be meaningful in the context of employee engagement programmes; and sustainability can come to be meaningful in the context of providing employees with bike-sheds. Secondly, that the discourses can cross fertilise, such that social audits in supply chains can become relevant to brand and ‘visual identity’ can become meaningful for sustainability. Sustainability communications does its work at the intersections of the two and is fundamental to this process of entanglement, providing much of the resources and rationale for integration – not least through its own motivation towards establishing a unique jurisdiction of professional competence. Whether and to what extent brand and sustainability link and align in such a way as to form an integrated complex of enduring stability remains to be seen – it is too early to tell. Not least, obviously, such a complex depends on the discourse of sustainability itself enduring.

\(^{91}\) I provide a definition of corporate sustainability in the Introduction.
10.2 “Can Brands Save the World?” The Discourse of Corporate Sponsored Sustainable Consumption

“Many brands have built a trusted relationship with millions of consumers, and with it brand loyalty, which can last a lifetime. We believe this gives them both the power and the responsibility to help people lead better, more sustainable lives. In fact, it’s hard to see sustainable consumption becoming mainstream unless brands take the lead.”

Justin King, Chief Executive, J Sainsbury plc; Amanda Sourry, Chairman, Unilever UK & Ireland; Dr Sally Uren, Deputy CEO, Forum for the Future (Forum for the Future, 2011)

“Brands could save the day”, writes Sally Uren, Deputy CEO of business focused sustainability charity Forum for the Future, on the Guardian’s Sustainable Business Blog:

“Really? Surely it is their seductive power that has fuelled our current unsustainable lifestyle? …Brands have indeed got us into this mess by encouraging us to buy more and more stuff without any understanding of the wider impact. But brands could help provide some of the solutions…” (Uren, 2011)

In recent years a remarkably coherent and widely rehearsed narrative concerning the relation of brands to sustainability has emerged, shared by increasing numbers of communication professionals, brand managers and business sustainability specialists. It is articulated by some of the most senior figures in commercial communications and CEOs of consumer facing corporations.

The basic narrative is thus:

- Driven by the power of marketing and advertising to create consumer desire, brands have been implicated in the development of an unsustainable consumer culture
- Brands are, however, not simply part of the problem, they are an important part of the solution; because that same power of persuasion can be used to mobilise the trust that consumers put in brands for the project of sustainability
- Brands should not wait passively to respond to consumer demand for sustainability but should form the vanguard of a new, sustainable consumer culture

---

92 The trope is increasingly common. For example, Jez Frampton, CEO of agency Interbrand posed the question as his keynote speech to the 2009 Sustainable Brands conference. Thankfully we can report that even for this, the most receptive of audiences, who “buzzed with the concept… the overwhelming consensus was that brands can’t save the world” (Better the World, 2012)
• The power of marketing and advertising is to make the ‘new normal’. Brands can harness this power to create a new culture of sustainable consumption by making sustainability the ‘new normal’.

Sustainable consumption is now firmly on the agenda of the leaders of the corporate world - or at least of the leaders of the consumer brand owners and their promotional lieutenants. The World Economic Forum’s (WEF) initiative ‘Driving Sustainable Consumption’, launched in 2008, encapsulates this well. Noticeably, for my purposes, of the twenty eight corporate backers, of which the largest group is consumer goods companies, there are five of the largest multinational commercial communications groups: Aegis Media; Edelman; Omnicom Group; Publicis Groupe; and WPP (WEF, 2012: 6).93

The WEF initiative has progressively set out what it calls a “normative vision” for achieving a more sustainable world by 2030, in which GDP growth has been decoupled from environmental impact. It is unequivocal that ‘business as usual’ is untenable, providing an economic argument which maps out the consequences of global failure to go from piece meal, incremental change to radical transformation. Its annual reports collectively rehearse the above narrative.

The programme began with chief executives of the WEF Consumer Industry group at the 2008 annual meeting at Davos, who were “inspired by the question: What is the business case to start meeting tomorrow’s consumer demands today?” (WEF, 2009: 5).

The 2010 report heralded a vision for 2030 in which:

“The “new normal” is an economy in which: Consumers are the driving force. Through more meaningful engagement and co-creation, consumers are positively engaged with the benefits of sustainable consumption to themselves, their families and their communities.” (WEF, 2010: 16)94

93 Each has a sustainability service offering launched in the last five years, see Chapter 6.

94 I do not want to caricature the model of the consumer in these reports. Note, for example: “Beliefs, emotions, brand image, established habits, social influences and heuristics...all play a role here. A large part of consumer decision-making depends on emotion, intuition or habit...with little or no conscious consideration of alternatives. Choice is also influenced by ... the broader social and cultural context.” (WEF 2011: 13-17)
In the 2011 report, *The Consumption Dilemma*, Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO of the world’s largest advertising group WPP, acknowledges the dilemma:

“All our instincts as clients, agencies [and] media owners are to encourage people to consume more – *super consumption*. This is embedded in the consumer’s psyche and we will have to respond by making sacrifices or doing things differently.” (*WEF* 2011: 13)\(^95\)

The 2011 report saw as “a key point of leverage” consumers, business and government collaborating to set “social norms for sustainability...to shift from an era of ‘super consumption’... to a ‘new normal’ of consumption emphasizing value above ‘stuff’ ” (*WEF*, 2011:13). It goes on:

“Trust, co-creation and authentic consumer engagement will complement price and logistics as the characteristics of successful businesses in this new world of consumer engagement...consumer engagement can become far more collaborative and more socially driven, building far stronger brands in the process. Sustainability has a strong role to play in the new world of consumer engagement – building social values of sustainability and businesses’ trust with consumers around those values... [B]rands have a role to play in changing the world.” (*WEF*, 2011: 17)

The consumer here, however, is not driving sustainability through aggregate demand. While “[c]onsumers want the new products, services, cost savings and value delivered by radical thinking from the brands they trust” (*WEF*, 2012:20) “[b]usinesses must reshape demand by making sustainable consumption more personal and relevant to consumers. “ (ibid: 6)

The recent scenarios report *Consumer Futures 2020*, produced jointly by Forum for the Future, Sainsbury’s and Unilever similarly counsels:

“Don’t wait for consumers to demand more sustainable products and services. Savvy brands will make money by accelerating the transition to a more sustainable world. Companies should use their marketing, communications and innovation skills to create

---

\(^95\) The Sorrell quote is taken from a 2008 speech at a ‘Branding for Good’ event, reported in industry magazine Marketing Week in which he notably criticised Apple as irresponsible for their strategy of deliberate product obsolescence (Mortimer, 2008).
consumer demand for sustainable and profitable products and services.” (Forum for the Future, 2011)

We find a similar narrative in the outputs of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development’s96 ‘Sustainable Consumption Workstream’ (WBCSD, 2012) in which Havas, the sixth largest global advertising group played an important role. Again: “brand owners can play a major role, both in changing their practices and in educating their consumers” (WBCSD, 2008: 16). And the intermediating role of commercial communications is key:

“Marketing has a vital role to play in decoupling material consumption from consumer value... because it allows products and information to flow between producers and consumers...Brand values are communicated to consumers [and] provide signals to consumers about social and behavioral norms” (WBCSD, 2008: 28)

These accounts are not triumphalist as to the current status of brands with consumers, acknowledging numerous market research reports showing that consumers are less trusting of brands than in the past. Indeed one of my key informants, who took global communication group Havas into the WBCSD and contributed to its Vision 2050 report (2010), talks of “the crisis of brands” (KI-7). Rather, what the corporate sponsoring of sustainable consumption offers is a solution not only to the environmental crisis but to a crisis in the brand model, and, more ambitiously, to a legitimacy crisis in capitalism itself. The same key informant comments:

“...business is frankly on the backfoot generally. It is not an exaggeration to say that most CEOS, most of the C-suite in businesses are thinking ‘we don’t know what’s going to happen next, we’re running out’ - not just in terms of resources but it feels like the model is kind of exhausted and it’s no coincidence you get Unilever with their Sustainable Living Plan, Nestle with their Shared Value...a lot of these quite fundamental shifts in business and that’s all to do with sustainability - whether its big S or little s – the sustainability of that business or that business’ contribution to the broader sustainability debate.” (KI-7)

96 The WBCSD, founded in 1995 in the wake of the ‘Rio Earth Summit’ has been widely criticised by environmentalists as a business lobby working to recuperate the radical challenge the movement represents to corporate capitalism. For an early account, see Mayhew, N. (1997. More recent criticism can be found in Greenpeace’s ‘Who’s Holding Us Back?’ report (2011). On the other hand the WBCSD is widely praised by corporate sustainability executives (e.g. Globescan, 2006)
Fernando Rodes Vila, former CEO of Havas, and Guy Champniss, Havas’ top brand and sustainability adviser have recently collaborated on a book length exposition of this crisis of the “increasingly redundant...world of bare knuckle brand competition for consumer loyalty”. For Vila and Campniss brands’ outmoded model has contributed to the widespread destruction of “social capital” and only by re-inventing themselves as “Social Equity Brands” that build the “social capital” that “drives sustainability” can they survive and succeed. Brand efforts, they aver, must be predicated not on the outmoded CSR model of “total transparency” but “the permanent eradication of acts of deceit” (Champniss and Vila, 2011).

This notion of the contemporary ‘crisis of brands’ was commonplace amongst key informants, often articulated in the context of the revolution of social media and ubiquitous communications technology. Thus John Grant, author of the widely read The Green Marketing Manifesto (2007), commented:97

“There’s something about brands that feels out of joint today. They were invented to give personality and appeal to anonymous, identical, industrial goods. And today we are into a media paradigm which is intensely personal and connective...Compare two toasters. One a Philips ‘Toaster 2000’ - shiny and on a pedestal in a retail display. Who really gives a stuff about that toaster these days? The other toaster is on eBay and it comes with a long story about how this toaster was a wedding present but the night before the groom did something he shouldn’t have and now the wedding presents are all up for auction. Now that is an interesting toaster, it has a real story.” (KI-14)

This sense of a crisis in branding recalls Holt’s dialectical account of brand development (2002). According to Holt the current branding paradigm “is premised upon the idea that brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources” (Holt 2002: 83) and that in order to achieve value as cultural resources they must be perceived as authentic. This paradigm is, Holt argues, running into intrinsic contradictions. The fierce competition between brands over authenticity raises the bar on such claims, whilst at the same time anti-branding critics and sceptical consumers are provided leverage to expose the in-authenticity of these claims. According to Holt marketers are engaged in an ideological struggle over the meaning of authenticity.

---

97 Grant was co-founder of St Luke's, a London advertising agency that broke away from parent group Chiat\Day in 1995 to form an ‘employee shareholder democracy’ and which championed ethical and environmental themes (for an account see Law, 1998). Grant is an influential figure in UK marketing; his The New Marketing Manifesto was in Amazon's Top Ten Business Books of 1999.
with anti-branding activists, who reframe authenticity to demand that corporations are transparent in their behaviour to employees, consumers, governments and the environment; or in other words engage in corporate sustainability.

I discussed the basic narrative invoked here with several key informants. While the ‘crisis of brands’ and marketing’s power to “make outlandish green choices attractive in cultural terms, and make damaging current practices...unattractive, ostracised” (Grant, 2007: 33) are common currency amongst practitioners, some informants were noticeably cooler towards the idea of corporate-led attempts at behaviour change (as opposed to improving operational and product sustainability):

“I just wonder, is it really Unilever’s place to be telling people to have shorter showers?”
(Senior corporate sustainability communications consultant, KP-1)

For Chris Arnold, former Saatchi & Saatchi board member and Creative Director of an “ethical marketing agency” brand-led sustainable consumption was just “wishful thinking” (KI-15). The former head of brand for a major UK blue chip regarded the idea as “re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic” given, in his view, capitalism’s head long-dive towards environmental apocalypse (KI-3).

This partial disjuncture between the accounts of my key informants and the narrative above suggests to some degree that it is a discourse that sits more comfortably with the corporate elite than sustainability communications practitioners. It is certainly not a discourse that I encountered day to day in the Agency where I undertook my field work. Sustainability communication practitioners, while by no means politically homogenous as a group, tend to be more sceptical of corporate capitalism than corporate sustainability executives.

Clearly the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption is one that provides ethical legitimacy in the face of the legitimation crisis provoked by climate change, environmental degradation and the recent financial paroxysms. And it is sustainable consumption, rather than simply corporate sustainability, that enables the strong positioning as an ethical vanguard.

Introducing a report produced for advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather, the authors note the extraordinary mood of the corporate elite meeting at the COP-16 climate talks in Cancun, Mexico (in which the authors are clearly comfortably placed):

---

98 Arnold is a well known figure in the field, who writes a regular column on ethical marketing on industry website BrandRepublic.com and is the author of Ethical Marketing and the New Consumer (2009)
“...the heavy hitters from the private sector were taking matters into their own hands. It is unusual, in these rarified circles, to hear talk of creating a mass movement on everyone’s lips...this elite cadre knows that to achieve our goals we must motivate a mass green movement, shifting mainstream consumers to a more sustainable way of living.” (Bennett and Williams, 2011: 1)

10.2.1 The Ethical Projects of Commercial Communications

The above qualifiers accepted, sustainability communications more broadly does partake of this ethical project. The project of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption provides practitioners with not simply an anaemic sense of ‘communications for good’ or social marketing but the sense of the potential to mobilise the whole edifice of commercial communications to the ethical project of re-making capitalism. Here, of course, it deploys the core self-understandings of creativity and radical innovation.99

The development of an ethical project in the practice of advertising and marketing is not historically novel. Tellingly both previous examples occurred in periods of cultural and economic transformation, and accompanied an eventual overhaul of many of the everyday practices and institutional arrangements of practitioners: the ‘scientific advertising’ of Edward L. Bernays; and the ‘creative revolution’ of the 1960s. I will briefly address these historical examples to better demonstrate how the emerging discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption may play a homologous role in the new constitution of commercial communications that sustainability communications entails.

Edward L. Bernays, often cited as founding father of Public Relations, advocated a professional model of the practice as two-way communication requiring the practitioner to represent the public to their client as well as to represent the client to the public, an ethical relation which translated to advertising as the practitioner representing the consumer. As Mayhew notes: “Obligation to represent the public would give practitioners a degree of insulation from complete domination by the client, a measure of independence grounded on the notion that professional public relations experts are bound to work in the public interest” (1997: 203).

Moreover, the ‘scientific advertising’ that developed in the early twentieth century and came into its own in the interwar period, drawing on the psychological sciences (Bernays was famously Freud’s

99 For analyses of the role of ‘creativity’ in the discourse and identity of advertising see Frank (1997) and Nixon (2002).
nephew), was couched in terms of an ethical project of creating demand for the new consumer capitalism. In the face of the Great Depression advertising was undergirded by a moral, Keynesian mission:

“In promoting the new psychology as a means of manipulating the individual's consumption habits, psychologists and their lay colleagues argued that the new advertising theory was the necessary fuel of America's industrial machinery. Without advertising to create new wants and tap old desires, the new theorists warned, American industrial progress could not continue.” (McMahon 1972: 8)

Just as today’s new corporate sustainability elite conceive of themselves as an ethical vanguard engineering consumer desire for the greater good, so did Bernays conceive of the social role of commercial communications as, literally, propaganda (the term lacked negative connotations at the time):

“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in any democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.” (Bernays, 1928: 37)

We might see scientific advertising’s formulation as an overarching ethical project entangled in the teleoaffective structure of the advertising practice complex (Schatzki, 2002). This teleological regime within commercial communication practice was swept away by the ‘creative revolution’ of advertising in the 1960s. “[T]he limitations of the Taylorist style of advertising had become apparent to most of the industry” by the end of the 1950s, writes Thomas Frank: “And during the ‘60s they would be swept away along with the bureaucratic agency structures that had created them in a “creative revolution” that celebrated the mystical carnavelesque properties of creativity and actually embraced the critique of mass society that the ads of the fifties had done so much to inspire” (1997: 39).

Vance Packard’s famous 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders* had ignited scandal in the English speaking world in bringing to light the industry’s sinister techniques of psychological manipulation that Bernays was so happy to trumpet as undergirding democratic order.¹⁰⁰ Packard was part of the broad reaction (embracing for example J.K. Galbraith, see Slater (2011)) to the ‘brainwashing’ of

¹⁰⁰ For an account of the integration of psychological techniques in advertising and marketing practice in the UK over a similar period see Miller and Rose (2008, chapters 5 and 6). On the legitimation crisis of advertising at this time see Slater (2011).
advertising that fed into a milieu of critique of mass culture and the ‘culture industry’ drawn from critical theory (e.g. Marcuse, [1964] 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno, [1944] 1972). As Frank notes, “during the sixties, Madison Avenue itself would adopt a version of Packard’s critique and cast products as solutions to the problems of mass society he had done so much to publicize” (1997: 41).101

This new ethical project of advertising was an emancipatory one in which the new consumer culture, what Frank (1997) calls “hip consumerism”, segued with the new rebellious counter-cultural values of personal liberation.102 It was entangled in the novel everyday practices of the new breed of advertising ‘creatives’ and new institutional agency structures in which they were practiced. Moreover it occurred in the context of broader economic transformation commonly conceived as the shift to post-Fordism and post-industrialism (Kumar, 1995).

The immediate inheritors and fellow travellers of this revolution were those Bourdieu famously dubbed the “ethical avant garde” of the new consumer capitalism (1984: 356): the “new cultural intermediaries” who both embodied the new consumer capitalism in their own lifestyle and values and articulated it through their role in cultural production (Du Gay 1997).

I argue, therefore, that in the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption we can glimpse the contours of a new teleological regime challenging the emancipatory-consumer discourse of the ‘creative revolution’ of the ‘60s. Just as the two previous historical ethical projects of commercial communications, it arises at a juncture of cultural and economic transformation which itself encompasses novelty in the everyday practices and institutional arrangements of the communications industry, evinced by the emergence of sustainability communications as a novel commercial field. I do not maintain that it is the ideology of sustainability communications, so much as an emergent ethical project signalling a mutation in the teleoaffective structure of the wider practice complexes of commercial communications.

101 Frank (1997) charts the ideological and institutional unfolding of the “creative revolution” and argues that advertising, especially through campaigns of the iconic brands of the day, played a significant role in both the wider cultural shift and the entanglement of counter-cultural values with the new “hip consumerism”.

102 Bernays had in fact prefigured this new ethical project. In a now famous psychoanalytically-informed campaign for the American Tobacco Corporation in 1928 he drew on the resources of the Sufferage movement to challenge the taboo on women smoking in public; cigarettes were dubbed ‘Torches of Freedom’ in adverts aimed at the woman consumer. A Lucky Strike adverts ran with the line: “An Ancient Prejudice has been Removed” (PR Museum, 2012).
10.2.2 Conclusion: Operationalising Sustainable Consumption

To conclude this section, I have outlined above the key features of the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, how it articulates relations of brand and sustainability and how it links to sustainability communications as an ethical project.

Thus far corporate efforts to actually engage with sustainable consumption have, unsurprisingly, largely involved the provision of more sustainable goods and services. In communication terms, above and beyond simply marketing more sustainable goods and services, this has chiefly involved either: communication work to operationalise the sustainability gains of product innovations – such as Proctor & Gambles’ ‘Turn to 30’ campaign discussed above; incentivising consumers to engage in sustainable consumption practices – such as M&S rewarding clothes recycling at Oxfam’s second-hand shops (Marks and Spencer, 2012); or didactic campaigns around sustainable practices, provision of sustainability-related information to consumers and engagement campaigns deploying social media.

Recently some corporations have sought more innovative engagements. Walmart and Unilever’s recent collaboration to encourage water and energy saving through taking shorter showers seeks to intervene in the everyday practices in which their products are used (Guardian, 2011b). In 2010 Pepsi diverted $20 million marketing budget normally earmarked for SuperBowl advertising to Pepsi Refresh, an initiative which awarded the money as grants to fund innovative socially or environmentally beneficial projects (Preston, 2011). Thus far such developments are limited. But it is towards these more ambitious entanglings in people’s everyday lives that the ambition of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption undoubtedly lies.

Many practitioners see social media and ubiquitous communication technologies as the ‘platform’ through which corporate innovation around sustainable consumption will arise - and see an inherent link between social media and sustainability. As one of my informants put it:

“I think social media and sustainability are far more connected from a comms point of view than most people currently think. Transparency, being held to account, is being as much driven by social media as it is by the endeavours of the businesses involved. [Communication agencies are] reversing themselves into that sustainability space, because they’re taking on digital [communications] and that’s actually the biggest enabler [of sustainability].” (KI-7)
Holt offers a speculative, optimistic vision of such developments in which consumers’ increased capacity to monitor the behaviour of brands and developing norms around such activity pushes the logic of authenticity in contemporary branding “to build lines that link brand and company” (2002: 88). For Holt the current “brand paradigm” necessitates successful brands “serve as cultural source materials” for their consumers. Brands will “only be trusted to do so when their sponsors have demonstrated that they shoulder civic responsibilities” (ibid.). Moreover, “[t]hese efforts blur the boundary between internal organizational decisions and external branding decisions” (2002: 86) thus extending and consolidating the province of branding, and thus sustainability communications practitioners’ area of professional competence. I address these issues in the following section.

In Arvidsson’s account of brands (see Section 2.4.3), however, the ambitions of the new corporate sustainability elite for corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption can only be seen as an intensification of the project of brand management as “a vanguard form of capitalist governance” (2007: 137) which seeks to put to work the capacity of consumers and workers to produce a common social world.

Arvidsson’s claim that brands rely on the productivity of consumers for the co-production of the values that they promise (2007: 34) is a commonplace of both contemporary academic marketing and brand practitioner literature (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne et al, 2008). In Section 2.4.3 I suggested that claims concerning the extent of such processes in the social world were somewhat overblown. However, such co-production of brand value, or “shared responsibility between consumer and brand”, as one of my informants put it (KI-15), is central to the ambitions of brands in mobilising sustainable consumption. Thus evolving relations of brand and sustainability could be said to further instantiate in the social world branding’s ambitions for co-production with consumers.

Sustainability provides much potential material for projects of consumer-brand co-production: normative elements through which brands may seek to realise ‘authenticity’ with consumers; and practices of subjectivity incorporating sustainability – “aims, methods, targets, techniques and criteria [through which] individuals...master, steer, control, save or improve themselves” (Miller and Rose, 2008: 7). The imbrication of brand and sustainability in consumer “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988) that this implies is today far more ambition than realised practice. Where we do find firmer empirical footing of brand and sustainability mobilised with technologies of the self is the workplace, to which I turn in the next section.
10.3 The Cultural Politics of Work: Operationalising Sustainability

“What are the ‘green shoots’ of behaviour change in your organisation that you could nurture? Where do you see the best expressions of ‘positive deviancy’? What norms and routines are inhibiting the transition to a more eco-socially aware culture? How could you unravel them?” (Stubbings and Ceasar, 2012: 4)

I begin this section by unpacking an exemplary account given by Alexandra Stubbings and Nicolas Ceasar, Co-heads of Sustainability Practice at Ashridge Business School,103 from which the quotation above is taken. Stubbings and Ceasar report on a major piece of research which reviewed 176 sustainability reports and drew on interviews with forty four “practitioners from across 24 organisations who are leading on embedding sustainability” (Stubbings and Ceasar, 2012: 1).104 This account appears in an online quarterly magazine dealing with corporate communications issues produced by the sustainability communications agency SalterBaxter.105 The account therefore simultaneously represents both business school discourse on sustainability and brand, and that discourse’s construction through reported corporate sustainability practitioner discourse on sustainability and brand. Moreover, we find it in the context of ‘thought leadership’ produced by a sustainability communications agency. It is worth quoting at length:

“[W]hat differentiated the real pioneers was the intersection of brand, culture and how they are framing sustainability. Most significantly, the change strategies they employed took account (consciously or otherwise) of their organisation’s identity...Organisational identity is where brand and culture meet. We express who we are—our values, culture, our strategic intent—through the labels we use to describe ourselves. We create impressions to the market through our products and services, our marketing and communications strategies. External stakeholders make sense of those messages and

103 Ashridge Centre for Business and Sustainability is a major specialist centre within the School, probably the biggest dedicated centre within a UK business school. Ashridge offers courses on sustainability aimed at senior executives, as well as a sustainability focused MSc programme.

104 The report itself is “Sustainability As Usual: Strategic Change for the 21st century” (Ashridge, 2012)

105 See www.salterbaxter.com/category/thinking/directions-supplements
reflect back a revised image which is then made sense of internally and becomes embedded into the culture.” (ibid.)

“Embedding sustainability”—in the argot of our time—or successfully institutionalising practices of, and normalising discourses of, sustainability in the corporation, then requires, in this discourse, its triangulation with brand and corporate culture.

The account is exemplary of how brand has come to be seen as partaking of complex processes internal to the organisation as well as external relations: it mediates and is bound up in “corporate culture”; it goes out into the world and brings back revised understandings of itself. Moreover, as such, it is seen as intimately related to the successful incorporation of sustainability.

Descending from this level of abstraction, Stubbings and Ceasar illustrate the process more prosaically:

“For Virgin, the challenger brand identity is a compelling one, and framing sustainability as ground breaking innovation, beating the competition, as adventure, reflects well the image staff have of their company. For Coca-Cola Enterprises, the youthful, fresh lifestyle identity will connect more readily with Gen Y and their desire for greater meaning and freedom in their work.” (ibid.: 2)

To be successfully “embedded” internally, then, sustainability is articulated through the connotations of brand that we are more used to seeing articulated externally to consumers. These brand “frames”, Stubbings and Ceasar suggest, are mobilised by corporate sustainability executives: through “discursive leadership” they incorporate discourses of sustainability into dominant brand discourse and achieve an integration of external brand and internal corporate culture through “aligning cultural practices” (Ashridge, 2012: 2).

The instrumental value of this to the corporation is clear:

“We want to feel like the good guys and focusing on a positive environmental and social agenda builds positive personal and group ‘affect’...More engaged employees equals higher performance and top-line revenues...” (Stubbings and Ceasar, 2012: 3)
10.3.1 Winning the ‘War for Talent’ with Sustainability

Stubbings and Caesar note that at Unilever “employee engagement scores...were boosted by double digit percentage points” following the launch of their widely praised Sustainable Living Plan initiative (ibid). Corporations will routinely employ market research techniques on their own employees to gauge views on the company, its brands and initiatives – not only surveys, but interviewing and focus groups.

Here, brand and sustainability are purposively woven together to positively channel affect in corporate culture and so enhance worker performance. This instrumental, and ultimately commodifiable, value of corporate sustainability initiatives through ‘employee engagement’ is widely acknowledged in contemporary business discourse. To quote but one example, Carol Cone, head of Business + Social Purpose practice at Edelman, the world’s largest public relations firm, reporting on the 6th Annual Best Practices in Change & Internal Communications Summit notes:

“Employee engagement is absolutely critical for every business today that wants to win in the market place...how the employee feels the authenticity and the relevance...[W]e know from research [younger employees] expect companies to stand for something and provide opportunities for engagement...[they ask] ‘How do I get involved with our green and sustainability strategy? How about being involved in diversity? In human rights policy? In supply chain?’ So it’s all elements of corporate responsibility, citizenship, whatever you want to call it, that ‘millenials' are expecting today...today it’s a war for talent and companies must have a greater purpose so they can be successful.” (3BL Media, 2011)

The above statement is part of a plethora of business discourse around, firstly, the importance of employee engagement for productivity and, secondly, the importance of mobilising sustainability for employee engagement. Such discourse is routinely animated by studies and surveys of the attitudes of employees and business school students. The importance of these studies and surveys is not

106 The initiative committed the company to a raft of impressive sustainability targets and the company has been widely acknowledged as being at the forefront of corporate sustainability, see www.sustainable-living.unilever.com.

107 Numerous examples could be invoked. Many stress the high levels of importance placed on business sustainability by ‘millenials’ (i.e. those who have entered the workforce since 2000), no doubt partly in the context of the four-fold increase since 2005 in FTSE100 companies employing dedicated sustainability executives at Board or one level below (Business Green, 2012). Thus, Forbes reports on the annual Net Impact Talent Report: What Workers Want showing that those that believe they have positive social and
the degree to which they are sociologically accurate (which is not to suggest they are not). It is that they are ubiquitous devices of a “cultural circuit of capitalism” (Thrift, 2005), circulated widely through business media and business schools, that have real effects on corporate practice.

Thrift’s notion is suggestive, drawing attention to “the extraordinary discursive apparatus...of the capitalism of the post-60s period” (2005: 6): “In particular, this circuit arises from the concentration of three different institutions – management consultants, management gurus and especially business schools – all surrounded by the constant swash of media, which in itself constitutes a purposeful part of the circuit” (2005: 95). This apparatus is performative, what Miller (1998) calls “virtualism” – remaking the world in the likeness of its own understandings through its deployment and dissemination in and as business practice: a “mass sharing of management expertise” (Thrift, op cit.) and “routinization of innovation” (Thrift, 2005: 7).

The employee engagement discourse, drawing on an economic rationality to support sustainability initiatives, then, complements and becomes tangled with the discourse invoked by the Ashridge writers; which concerns operationalising pre-existent resources within the discourses of brand and corporate culture for the furtherance of an ecological rationality (“embedding sustainability”).

As discussed in previous chapters, employee engagement programmes are a major part of sustainability communications agencies’ day to day work – far more significant than consumer facing communications. As one Creative Director explains quite simply:

“Employee engagement is a huge part of our business here because people want to feel proud of the company they work for. They want to believe and they want to see that their company is doing the right thing.” (KI-9)

Another informant, a pioneer of such employee sustainability programmes, with over fifteen years experience, explained their evolution:

“Businesses really, really struggle to embed sustainable behaviours into their workforce – at all levels. You could get businesses 10, 15 years ago saying what they are saying now. The difference is... the conversations [with organisations] have shifted. In the early environmental "impact" through their jobs have “greater job satisfaction by a ratio of 2.1” (Klein, 2012). A widely reported Gallup Consulting study finds that companies with strong employee engagement programmes demonstrate a 16% increase in profitability over those that do not (Gallup, 2012). And for a final example: a 2008 survey by recruitment specialists Hill & Knowlton (2008) found 58% of MBA students regarded “social and environmental responsibility” as a “very” or “extremely” important attribute of companies when seeking employment.
days we were talking to facilities managers, it then moved on, companies started to get energy and environmental managers...then CSR managers when businesses had CSR teams...and broadly it’s now moved on to a much more strategic, higher level discussion...The more recent shift has been quite profound.” (KI-8)

Brand, as the Ashridge writers identify, is increasingly being mobilised as such a strategic resource and thus it is here again, in the process of intensifying the entanglement between brand, sustainability and other business functions, that sustainability communications functions.

10.3.1.1 Branded workers

As the notion of brand has become deterritorialised from its origins in design it sought embodiment in workers.108 The growth of the service economy placed employees serving branded goods and services in more direct relation with consumers, thus promoting a concern with workers as brand representatives, whether as “branded workers” engaged in “aesthetic labour” (Pettinger, 2004), or remotely contributing to the consumer’s ‘brand experience’. Workers are seen as extensions of the brand, as “additional resources for animating the brand ‘personality’” (Moor, 2007: 36).

In the above example, at the intersection of brand and sustainability within the organisation, we find not workers marshalled as resources of brand at the interface with consumers, but workers called upon to animate brand within corporate culture. The ‘virtuous circle’ that the Ashridge writers identify above is one where brand is mobilised as a vehicle to recruit employees to the sustainability strategy of the organisation and sustainability is mobilised as a brand value to channel the affect of workers towards the organisation – and so reproduce the corporate culture that the organisation intentionally aims to create. It seeks to imbricate workers into corporate culture such that they come to embody the brand.

Just, therefore, as brand valuation as a technique “translates consumer affect into commercially viable attention” (Arvidsson 2006: 74; cf. Moor and Lury 2012) (what Arvidsson calls “productive consumption”, see Section 2.4.3) intra-organisational branding seeks to make workers’ subjectivity and personality directly productive (Thoburn, 2007: 86). The extent to which the alignment of workers’ subjectivity with brand is achieved could therefore be said to be the extent to which a

108 See for example, Hamish Pringle and William Gordon’s popular Brand Manners: How to create the self-confident organisation to live the brand Wiley & Sons: 2001
collective branded subjectivity can be put to work and brand valorized as an alienable property of the organisation, as distinct from products or services (ibid).

10.3.2 Employee Engagement, Behaviour Change and Governmentality

The more advanced employee engagement programmes do not merely involve the company engaging workers to improve its own sustainability performance but aim to intervene in the everyday practices of workers outside the workplace. Thus, for example, BT announced in 2006 a target of having 20% of their workforce “actively involved in carbon reduction initiatives at home and work by 2012” (BT Group, 2012). BT’s employee climate change initiatives include recruiting volunteer ‘Energy Champions’ who engage in awareness raising campaigns and energy audits in the workplace; and ‘Carbon Clubs’ where employees self-organise around initiatives, such as below:

“Jogging Walking Cycling (JWC) Carbon Club members are dedicated to reducing their carbon footprint while improving their health. They want to spend more time on their feet and wheels, and less time sitting in cars, buses, tubes and trains. Members track their mileage using an online spreadsheet and this is automatically turned into carbon saved. The club has already clocked up 23,000 miles by jogging, walking and cycling to work.” (Mayday Network, 2012)

To the extent that sustainability engagement programmes seek to motivate and intervene in the everyday consumption practices of employees outside the workplace, they become sites in which sustainability communications practitioners play a role as cultural intermediaries articulating, in a novel sense, the spheres of production and consumption. For many, workplace initiatives are likely to be the most common form of engagement with issues of sustainable consumption at any depth and therefore the workplace is, arguably, for many, the pre-eminent site in which sustainability communications engages people.

Behaviour change programmes may, as we see above, provide techniques for working on one’s own conduct, as part of an ethical project; challenging one’s own habitual or routine behaviour and changing or adopting new everyday practices. Foucault calls such practices “technologies of the self”; that is, techniques which “permit individuals a number of operations on their own bodies, conduct, thoughts so as to transform themselves in order to maintain a certain state” (Foucault 1988: 18). They become part of the individual’s apparatus of self-understanding. A central feature of modern technologies of the self is the role of expert knowledge, which offers resources for self-
transformative, ethical projects: “inculcating desires for self-development that expertise itself can guide” (Rose, 1999: 88).

The not uncommon metaphor of ‘the carbon diet’ is suggestive here. Such practices, especially as relating specifically to climate change, are structured, calculative techniques—such as the detailed personal auditing of the carbon footprints of everyday activities, products and services—envisaged within a broader ethical project of ‘going green’ or ‘living a low carbon life’.  

An argument against the significance of these work-based practices could be made from the general standpoint of the decline of significance of the workplace in identity construction, and as a central locus of social relations, in the face of the rise of a consumer society (e.g. Bauman 1988, 1998; Beck, 1992; Sennett, 1998). I would suggest the ‘end of work’ thesis that we find in these synthetic accounts of social change lacks empirical foundation. On the contrary, as Donzelot argues, the contemporary discourse of work claims to make “work itself the territory of the social, the privileged space for the satisfaction of social need” (1991: 253).

Foucault’s notion of governmentality (see Section 2.4.3) (1988a, 1988b, 1991; cf. Gordon, 1991) addresses how such practices may become articulated with a wider political field, in which the production of free, self-governing individuals, through a lattice of relationships to expert knowledges and practices, opens the space for the novel form of governance of the advanced liberal state (cf. Hindess, 1997; Lemke, 2000; Miller and Rose 2008; Rose, 1996, 1999). For Arvidsson brand management follows the general form of governmentality by “making the becoming of subjects and the becoming of value coincide” - a “process [that] proceeds through the agency of subjects” (2007:93). Thus we see in employee engagement programmes, mobilising sustainability through brand management, a form of governance enmeshing the practices of self-actualisation through work with the economic imperatives of the corporation.

---

109 Arvidsson (2005, 2006) argues that in “informational capitalism” the circulation of information between the traditionally distinct spheres of production and consumption is incorporated into the productive process through the “informational interface” of brand, complicating the distinction between the two. Thus we note how the calculable output of CO2-saving sustainability practices of employees in everyday life becomes available as part of the metrics of the corporate sustainability programme (the targets for employees engaged, the miles saved, the CO2 so reduced). A good example of a technical resource for such personal, calculable ethical projects is Chris Goodall’s How to Live a Low Carbon Life: The Individual’s Guide to Stopping Climate Change (Earthscan, 2007).

110 See Doherty (2009) for a review of empirical work countering this thesis, as well as his own contribution; see also du Gay (1996) and Warde (1996).
Noting that brand equity now sits on the balance sheets of most companies as a “substantial intangible asset”, Professor of Innovative Brand Management, Christoph Burmann proposes an “identity-based brand equity model” the novelty of which is that employees are incorporated as an “important internal source of brand equity” (Burmann et al., 2008: 390). As Holt has argued, branding has become “a distinctive mode of capital accumulation” (Holt, 2006a: 300). Even employee practices outside the workplace, in the above example, are potentially put to work by the corporation for the recruitment and retention of staff, the productivity gains that ‘engagement’ offers, and potentially taken up into the circuit of capital through valorisation as brand equity.

Clearly, the interface of sustainability behaviour change programmes and novel forms of brand equity valuation is of more interest as theoretical possibility than as common business practice. However, I would suggest this admission does not evacuate the idea of significance. Zwick et al. note of contemporary brand management discourse, “the image...of a brave new world” of “co-creation” (between consumer and brand) of brand value “has diffused quickly through the halls of business schools and corporations” (Zwick et al., 2008: 164). The Ashridge writers account of brand and sustainability is a variant of ‘co-creation’ in which the worker takes the place of the consumer. At the same time what is very evident is “the disconnection between the language of relationship, satisfaction and freedom pervading academic and professional discourse on co-creation, on the one hand, and the reality of increasingly rationalised systems of...exchange relations between customers and companies on the other” (ibid.: 174). However, the significance of the discourse of co-creation, Zwick et al. argue, is its importance within the capitalist imaginary as an attempt to re-imagine relations between company, brand and consumer.

In the Ashridge account we find both a report of existing practices in which relations of company, brand and employee are re-configured through sustainability and a novel contribution to the capitalist imaginary of company-brand-employee and brand-sustainability relations. I would suggest, firstly, we find the discourse of co-creation of brand value more commonly instantiated within such intra-organisational branding programmes as the Ashridge writers discuss than we do in existing producer-consumer relations; and secondly, that the performative nature of brand management is such that, where its imagination goes practice tends to follow.

10.3.3 Authenticity, Work and Sustainability: Or ‘Sustainability, It’s the Real Thing’

These forms of employee engagement, which aim to modify the relation of the individual to their work, can be seen in the wider context of the understanding of work as a means towards self-
realisation. As Donzelot puts it: “...the individual’s freedom...is now seen as meaning the possibility of permanently re-deploying one’s capacities according to the satisfaction one obtains in one’s work...and its capacity to thoroughly fulfil one’s potentialities” (1991: 252).

The discourse of “pleasure in work” (Donzelot, 1991), the new values, organisational practices and mode of governance of the productive sphere accompanies a similar transformation in the realm of consumption; the new consumer capitalism bemoaned by Bourdieu (1984), for which the new cultural intermediaries allegedly bear so much responsibility. The “creative revolution” of advertising, and the ethical project of emancipatory consumerism, can be seen as the vanguard then, not only of “hip consumerism” (Frank, 1997), but of this new cultural politics of work.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) find, in an analysis of ‘90s management discourse, the appearance of what they call the “new spirit of capitalism”, which emerges in answer to the legitimation crisis of the late ‘60s and ‘70s. They understand the “new spirit of capitalism” as the “ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism” (2005: 4), where ideology is understood in a materialist sense as “shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, bound up with actions and hence anchored in reality” (ibid.). We should recall here Thrift’s “cultural circuit of capitalism”, for it is through it that the new spirit is operationalised:

“This cultural circuit of capital is able to produce constant discursive-cum-practical change and considerable power to mould the content of people’s work lives, and it might be added...more general cultural models.” (Thrift 2005: 93)

If for Weber the exogenous values that animated the culture of early capitalism were drawn from Protestant religiosity, for Boltanski and Chiapello the resources for the new culture of capitalism were found (just as they were by advertising’s creative revolutionaries) in the countercultural critique of mass culture, which was internalised, co-opted and thus neutralised: “either through a direct response to critique aiming to appease it by acknowledging its validity; or by attempts at circumvention and transformation” (ibid.: 167). Thus values associated with the counter-culture—rejection of hierarchy, liberation, autonomy, creativity, conjoining of private and professional life, permanent innovation—become trumpeted as the dynamic values of an innovative new capitalism. The rise of Boltanski and Chiapello’s “new spirit of capitalism” accompanies the intensification in the processes whereby workers’ cognitive, affective and social skills become integral to the labour

111 Boltanski and Chiapello’s “spirit of capitalism” is distinct from a Weberian notion in that the exogenous critique is fuel for the recuperative motor of capital itself.
process. Their appropriation therefore demands novel justification. Furthermore, changes in institutional organisation and everyday work practice associated with a move to post-Fordist forms of production demand a new, reflexive, self-governing worker (much as the liberal state demands a self-governing citizen) out of place with the older managerial ideology and techniques of control.

The new cultural politics of work have been with us for some time. The mobilisation of sustainability within them is, however, new. If the raison d'être of the revolution in values in the workplace that Boltanski and Chiapello identify is ideological justification for engagement in capitalism, then the discourse of corporate sustainability has an important role to play, as business’ enthusiasm to wield sustainability in the ‘war on talent’ avers. ¹¹²

A crucially important way in which sustainability fits into the new spirit of capitalism is through the notion of authenticity. Fleming argues that the key to the contemporary cultural politics of work is that “employees now search for a sense of personal authenticity at work” (2009: 99), where once the worlds of work and personal authenticity were alien to one another. Similarly, for Boltanski and Chiapello, the new managerial discourse “aims to respond to the demands of authenticity and freedom” (2005: 97) historically posed by what they call the artistic critique of capitalism,¹¹³ the bohemian revolt against the inauthenticity and disenchantment of bourgeois life.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Kazmi et al (2012) repeat Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) discursive exercise on contemporary CSR literature and suggest CSR itself fulfils most of the characteristics of an emergent “brand new” spirit of capitalism, beyond that identified by Boltanski and Chiapello. However they offer certain caveats. Firstly, CSR is generally focused at an organisational level and therefore fails to fulfil the individual motivational function of a spirit of capitalism. Secondly, where it does concern employees it is managers, not workers, who are key subjects; while managers are offered CSR-related financial incentives, workers are offered “symbolic satisfactions” only (2012: 24), again militating against widespread co-option. Furthermore, they suggest unlike previous ‘spirits’ CSR does not offer individuals greater freedom, but rather obligation to the social order. My own analysis suggests ways in which employees are increasingly mobilised through sustainability, but does not claim that sustainability in itself represents an entirely new ‘spirit’. Kazmi et al’s analysis underscores the sense in which, as Eder (2001) suggests, sustainability is primarily an elite discourse; I suggest we find in corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption a concerted attempt to use sustainability for a wider, legitimating, mobilisation.

¹¹³ This is an example of both appeasement and transformation of critique; co-optation of elements of the artistic critique (especially, authenticity) at the expense of more structurally dangerous “social critique”, as well as transformation: “in its historical forms, the artistic critique subordinated the demand for authenticity to the demand for liberation...from capitalist accumulation in particular” (2005: 419).

¹¹⁴ Of course it is from just such a cultural resource that Campbell argues in the Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism (1987) that “modern non-rational bourgeois consumerism” (Campbell, 2003: 796) is derived.
Sustainability, then, offers a new and powerful resource for **authenticity** in the cultural politics of work, supplementing the existing resources of the artistic critique. Authenticity is above all an issue of the relation of inside and outside (Taylor, 1992a). Taylor presents a properly anthropological account of modernity, within which he demonstrates the cultural specificity of modern Western selfhood as crucially dependent on a notion of authenticity as relations of inside and outside: “we think our capacities or potentialities as ‘inner’, awaiting development which will manifest them or realize them in the public world” (1992a: 92). The modern subject adopts a “radical reflexivity” and: “what we turn to in radical reflexivity seems to demand description of something ‘inner’. This spatial metaphor is irresistible to describe the ‘space’ opened up by self-scrutiny” (1992a: 103).

Thus artistic authenticity is realised in external expression faithful to inner creativity. Understandings of brand are deeply tied up with the notion of authenticity: not least through the idea of ‘brand personality’. Brand authenticity is threatened either when the exterior brand connotations are met by dissonant meanings from the ‘interior’ in the sense of the company’s actual operations (think for example of ‘reputational damage’ caused by scandals in company supply chains), or when the interior artifice of branding is otherwise exposed. Of course as promotional artifice the brand is in a continual struggle to attain and maintain authenticity (see Holt, 2002).

Corporate sustainability is crucially concerned with redefining relations between the firm and what economists call externalities; relations of interior (the firm) and exterior (‘stakeholders’, supply chains, nature). As such it is peculiarly suited for mobilisation by brand as a resource of authenticity.

**10.3.4 Conclusion: Operationalising Sustainability in the Work Place**

To conclude this section by way of summary: sustainability has come to be articulated with brand intra-organisationally as a way of engaging employees; firstly, to pursue the project of ‘embedding sustainability’ and secondly, as a way of ‘winning the war on talent’ and reaping the gains in profitability that so ensue. Sustainability communications is crucially involved in creating employee engagement projects around sustainability. Such projects enable “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988) around sustainability and via which individuals achieve authentic self-realisation through the workplace, and thus are produced as productive subjects. However, we should adopt a note of caution here. As noted in Section 2.4.3 we should not confuse the ambitions of programmes of governance with their successful instantiation in processes of subjectification. Rather we should acknowledge such new techniques of power and look to further empirical analysis to assess whether they represent important emergent regimes or managerial fantasies of control.
In the following section I turn to my final research site, and examine sustainability communications articulations of brand and sustainability in the public sphere.
10.4 Sustainability, Brands and the Promotional Public Sphere

“NGOs are the most trusted institution – they fill a void in trust. Now they need to be sufficiently branded to appeal to the masses and shift behaviour.”

Richard Edelman, President and Chief Executive Officer, Edelman (WEF, 2012: 28)

What are we make of the CEO of the world’s largest public relations company, in a report from the World Economic Forum, telling us that in order to mobilise the masses for sustainability, NGOs should be helped with their brand management? This section explores the sphere we need to address in order to answer that question.

Sustainability communications is involved with the work of articulating brands and sustainability. The instantiations of brand and sustainability thus produced are found in ‘the market’, the firm and the “cultural circuit of capital” (Thrift, 2005), but are also, crucially, at work in the public sphere. As I signalled in the introduction to this chapter the public sphere is a site of sustainability communications, in Schatzki’s (2002: 64-65) sense of the term: a context in which it occurs, and of which it is a constituent part.

The public sphere is the space where collective actors (principally NGOs and corporations), that mobilise discourses of sustainability, agonistically engage with one another, with publics, and through which publics are formed around such engagements (Marres and Lezaun, 2011; Foster, 2012). It is this political space that is crucial for the formation of the emergent coalition of corporate sustainability (I would not argue exclusively, given the role of non-public policy formation). Furthermore, that their work often engages in the public sphere is a fundamental part of sustainability communication practitioners’ self-understanding of what they do.

There are three distinct ways in which brands and sustainability are articulated in the public sphere. Firstly, brands are directly mobilised by collective actors engaged in campaigns around sustainability issues, as the default cultural form for the representation of identity and the management of collective affective relations towards instrumental goals. Thus campaign groups and NGOs develop their own brands. Secondly, campaign groups forcibly ‘recruit’ consumer brands by drawing critical attention to social, ethical and environmental issues in either the direct operations of brand owner

\[115\] It is not only through brands that sustainability communications engage with the public sphere, but it is an important mode of engagement nonetheless. The motivation here is to explain something more about the nature of relations between brand and sustainability and understand the public sphere as a site, not to exhaustively analyse sustainability communications relations with it.
companies, or in supply chains. In the latter case, consumer brands may be ‘recruited’ primarily in order to address publics with systemic problems (such as Amazonian deforestation or labour conditions in supply chains) rather than the brand owners’ operations per se. Thirdly, corporations attempt to close the space for such challenges by pre-empting them with CSR and sustainability initiatives, thus turning their own brands into vectors of citizen-consumer concern. In Section 4.4.2 I examined the emergence of the business discourse of sustainability against the background in the 1990s of intensifying challenges to consumer brand owners from campaign groups. But while such campaigns are often dubbed ‘anti-brand activism’ what is often missed is the extent to which campaigning is dependent on the brand form. While it may be objected that campaigns directed against the operations of brand owners will inevitably leverage those brands’ publicity value, the issue becomes clearer when noting two cases. Firstly, NGOs and campaigns now ubiquitously adopt the techniques of brand management themselves. Secondly, the success of ‘anti-brand activism’ has been such that it is now routinely used by NGO campaigners to address systemic issues, rather than specific corporate malfeasance. Perhaps then the preeminent sense in which brands are used for the articulation of citizen-consumer concerns is not through the projects of corporate brand owners but the subversive projects of ‘anti-brand’ campaigners.

Arvidsson’s (2006) great contribution is to theorise brand as a capitalist institution – but brands are not only capitalist institutions whose primary concern is the extraction of surplus value. They are also cultural forms which may not operate primarily in the market – as in the case of NGO brands. The question of whether the ‘promotional’ form of the brand necessarily implicates it in processes of commodification, and thus inauthentic communication, is one squarely located in debates over the public sphere and the relation of commercial communications to it. In addressing the public sphere

---

116 Variants of the first and third include: non-commercial collective actors which invent new commercially orientated brands, such as Fairtrade or Rugmark, which address systemic issues; and coalitions of commercial and NGO actors which invent new marques in order to address systemic issues, such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil or the Marine Stewardship Council.

117 Indeed the speed of recent campaign victories demonstrates that brand owners are not responding to public opinion, they are responding to the agency of “imagined publics” (see Walker et al, 2010). Thus for example, Greenpeace’s recent and successful ‘Slaughtering the Amazon’ campaign had as its objective stopping deforestation caused by the Brazilian cattle industry and the complicity of the Brazilian government. After a three year investigation the campaign launched using carefully worded language to implicate sports brands such as Adidas and Nike “whose demand for leather may be supporting cattle ranchers” (Greenpeace, 2009). Such campaigns are increasingly drawing ire from corporate sustainability advocates. One commentator notes: “Crowbarring tenuous brand references into a campaign they feel needs to be maintained is not a long term tactic that will last” (Webb, 2012c).
we are thus confronted with normative issues; which issues are themselves of concern and debate within the field of sustainability communications.

Brands have become, in the words of one of my key informants, the “default interface between institutions and individuals” (KI-7). Moreover, in the mediatised selection environment of the “promotional public sphere” (Knight, 2010) brands (both commercial and non-commercial) are the institutional vehicles most appropriately structured to succeed in articulating citizen-consumer concerns. Sustainability communications has a particular significance here, then, in providing the expert knowledge and animating practices of these promotional vehicles.

10.4.1 The Public Sphere as Social Imaginary

The public sphere is a deeply contested concept. Understandings of the public sphere can be either descriptive or normative, are often both (e.g. Habermas 1991), and lack consensus not least due to the lack of a commonly shared social ontology (Taylor, 1992b: 220). In this section I present an understanding of the public sphere that is both compatible with practice theory and suggests why a conception of the public sphere is necessary.

Commonly the public sphere is thought of as the space between civil society and the state where public opinion is formed and contested, through a variety of media and face-to-face interactions. We may think of the emergence of the modern public sphere as the emergence of a new kind of public space in Western Europe and the US in the eighteenth century (ibid.: 218), in which a novel conception of the public, and of public opinion, appears (Habermas, 1991). It is, as Taylor says “‘a common space’ because although the media are multiple, as are the exchanges that take place in them, they are deemed to be in principle inter-communicating” (2004: 83). Further, the public sphere reflexively comes to produce normative conceptions of itself, and of its proper relation to the specific institutions, practices and material arrangements of mass public communication which is its material basis (Garnham, 1992: 360) and which structure access to it as public space (McLaughlin, 2004: 159).

For Taylor (2004) the public sphere is one of three fundamental “social imaginaries” that define Western modernity; the others being the market economy and society. They are self understandings that are constitutive of modern society, and which enable, by making sense of, certain social practices. Social imaginaries are widely shared, pre-reflexive understandings that make possible certain common practices and are themselves not separate from the social practices through which they transpire. They operate at the level of pre-doctrinal “embodied background understanding and
that which while nourished in embodied habitus is given expression on the symbolic level” (Taylor, 1992b: 219). Modern social imaginaries are congruent with secular, meta-topical spaces; that is, presented to their members as a “framework that exists prior to and independent of their actions” (Taylor, 2002: 115).

According to Taylor, the public sphere’s two key historical novelties are its independence from the (strictly) political and “its force as a benchmark for legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004: 188). It acquires normative status “because opinion from it is likely to be enlightened, and because the people are sovereign” (ibid.). In the public sphere, “members of society could exchange ideas and come to a common mind [and as] such, it constituted a metatopical agency” (ibid: 99).

Citing Warner’s (1992) study of the emergence of the public sphere in eighteenth century North America, Taylor notes that it was neither printing as a technology, nor the emergence of “print capitalism” that was sufficient for its emergence, but a cultural context in which the shared understandings of the new social imaginary could arise: “a public sphere can exist only if it is imagined as such” (Taylor, 2004: 85). This does not mean, of course, that it is merely imagined, Taylor notes. There are objective conditions for its existence: “that the fragmentary local discussion interrefer” (ibid.); and that communicative artefacts circulate from a plurality of sources. And further, it has a historically specific material basis - the material arrangements through which the public sphere is instantiated.

Thus, in his famous account of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas (1991) foregrrounds the coffee houses, salons and printing presses of the eighteenth century. Today we

118 Meta-topical space transcends particular places and times – church and state formed pre-modern meta-topical spaces (Taylor, 2004: 188). What is novel about modern meta-topical spaces is that they are grounded on nothing other than common action unfolding in secular time (Taylor, 2004). The two other secular, extra-political spaces crucial to the development of Western modernity are society organized in a market economy and “society as a ‘people’ that is, as a metatopical agency that is thought to pre-exist and found the politically organized society” (ibid.: 100).

119 For current purposes I do not need to rehearse the numerous criticisms of Habermas’ account of the public sphere; see especially Fraser (1990) and the edited collections Calhoun (1992), and Crossley and Roberts (2004). My concern is with criticisms that could be said to fall under cultural economy and with Habermas’ normative critique only in as much as it articulates a diffuse and popular critique of modern mass culture and the contemporary public sphere.
would need to evoke a vast edifice including televisions and media companies, the commercial communications industry, as well as the server farms and undersea cables of the internet, amongst many other things. The social imaginary of the public sphere invests many of the practices that take place with those material arrangements as their site – whether reading a newspaper, going on a demonstration or writing a press release.

Garnham (1992), amongst others, stresses the material and institutional basis on which the public sphere functions, noting that “the institutions...processes [and practices] of public communication are themselves a central and integral part of the political structure and process” (1992: 361). He notes that debate on the relationship between public communication and democracy tends to be dominated by “an essentially idealist transposition of the model of face to face communication to that of mediated communication” (ibid.). As such it “ocludes the problem raised by all forms of mediated communication, namely, how are the material resources necessary for that communication made available and to whom?” (ibid.). And we might add, the effect of different forms of media on the content of communication.

We can think therefore of the public sphere as a diffuse social imaginary, fundamental to the understanding of, and in, a wide range of practices, including all those practices of sustainability communications that address or aim to make publics, as well as the arrangements of its material basis which enable, constrain and qualify those practices.

10.4.2 The Promotional Public Sphere

What then are the characteristics of the contemporary public sphere that appear so conducive to the brand form? In order to answer this question we need to briefly review the decline of the bourgeois public sphere which preceded it.

Habermas (1991) presents the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere as an era undisturbed by the commodification of cultural products or the intrusion of capitalism’s instrumental reason into

---

120 Marres (2011: 504) notes: “Yet this materiality did ultimately not enter into his articulation of the conditions for the emergence of a public sphere, which he instead defined largely in procedural and abstract terms.”

121 In Schtazi’s terms (2002) a component of the general understanding, teleoaffective structure and normativity of such practices.
public discourse. Thus the emergence of modern mass media, and specifically mass entertainment, advertising and public relations, is for Habermas (1991) a primary cause of the decay of the liberal bourgeois public sphere. Henceforth strategic, or instrumental, reason begins to take over from critical, communicative reason. He has, however, been challenged on this periodisation on empirical, historical grounds. Contrary to Habermas’ characterisation, Darnton’s (1982, 1987) historical research has demonstrated, as Garnham puts it, a “visciously competitive structure of the early print market controlled not by freely discoursing intellectuals in search of public enlightenment but by booty capitalists in search of a quick profit” (1992: 359-60). Clearly then the instrumentality of economic practices has always been at play in the public sphere.

In itself this does not disallow the possibility that there has been a process akin to what Mayhew (1997) calls “the rationalisation of persuasion” – a progressive encroachment of instrumental, promotional logic. In such a view, which is far from uncommon (e.g. Wernick, 1991), the potency of brands in the contemporary public sphere would simply be characterised as the result of ubiquitous processes of commodification: the adoption by campaign groups of the brand form a victory of market constructs; ‘anti- brand activism’ a rearguard action against neoliberalism; and corporate articulation of brand and sustainability predictable recuperation.

However, I am wary of what Williams (2005) has called “one of the last remaining meta-narratives of our time” (2005: 2) – that of “the unstoppable transition to a commodified world” (2005: 1). Such tales tend to overlook the complexity of dynamic processes. Knight (2010) provides an account of the post-bourgeois public sphere that allows room for both the progressive expansion of “corporate promotionalism” and a countervailing tendency, in dialectic with promotional logic. Knight’s account resonates with the accounts of the brand-sustainability dynamic given by practitioners of sustainability communications (as well as Holt’s (2002) brand dialectic).

First, to return to the liberal bourgeois public sphere: Fraser (1990) makes the point that it was not only established on exclusionary criteria (i.e. male, bourgeois) but that Habermas takes at face value the bourgeois public spheres’ claim to represent the public. Revisionist historiography suggests that contemporaneous to its rise were the rise of “competing counterpublics” – “nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working class publics” (Fraser, 1990: 61). This is significant for my purposes because it underscores the point that Knight (2010) makes: that Habermas largely overlooks the implications of the fact that the latter part of the nineteenth century, that he characterises as the start of the “refeudalisation” of the bourgeois public sphere, was also the period in which the “counterpublics” began to succeed in having their voices heard.
New collective, social actors opened up new political problematics (abolitionism, organised labour, suffrage); at the same time “corporate promotionalism” increasingly entered the arena (ibid.: 177).

For Knight, the post-bourgeois public sphere, which he dubs the “promotional public sphere”, thus has the dual character of promotionalism and activism. Knight goes on:

“...and the hegemony of promotional communication tends to accentuate the credibility of voice over the validity of their claims...Dissenting voices often find that they have to conform to a promotional logic – branding and marketing themselves and their issues – in order to ensure media access, influence the terms of their public representation, and maximize public attention and political effect.” (2010: 178)

Or as Wernick puts it, a key characteristic of promotional culture is “a cultural homogenization of rhetorical form, amidst semiological complexity” (1991: 188). Wernick cautions against too sharp a periodisation of promotional hegemony; characterising the rise of promotional culture as “a cumulative tendency” (ibid: 186). Historical accounts of advertising (e.g. Leiss et al, 1991) can indeed demonstrate a process akin to Mayhew’s (1997) “rationalisation of persuasion” - wherein “again and again novel practices were initially opposed in the name of constraints grounded in [civic] ideals” or “as contrary to the norms of public discourse” before becoming normalised (Mayhew, 1997: 192-93). However, there are alternative historiographic approaches to advertising (e.g. McFall, 2004; Schwarzkopf, 2009) which do not take the “the evolution of persuasion as axiomatic”, as McFall puts it (2002: 148).

Knight’s account of the promotional public sphere leads to a more nuanced conclusion than Wernick’s assertion that the market has swallowed culture in “an all engulfing dynamic” (op cit.). For Knight a key effect of promotional logic has been “to accentuate the rhetorical power of speakers

---

122 Habermas acknowledges the proliferation of competing voices in as much as they undermine the common structural form of the bourgeois public sphere, which allegedly allowed private interests to be set aside due the commonality of (patriarchal, bourgeois) interests but due to his normative position does not recognise them as constructive of a legitimate public sphere.

123 Edwards (2004) presents a cogent argument against the distinction that Habermas makes between these old social movements and the “new social movements” (e.g. feminism, environmentalism) which he invests with the possibility of opening up a new, legitimate public sphere.

124 An example of countervailing tendencies pertinent to sustainability communications is the area of environmental claims in advertising; the UK, as elsewhere, has seen ‘norms of public discourse’ successfully push back excesses of promotion through tightened advertising regulations (Welch, 2008).
over arguments” (ibid.: 179). Thus, the “rationalization of decision-making and opinion-formation makes identities the point of reference for assessing and evaluating ideas” (2010:178).

The centrality of identity to communications in the promotional public sphere is such, argues Knight, that: “The accentuated role of credibility and belief makes the professionalization of identity formation, through the growing role of experts and consultants in message and image design, more important as a communicative resource” (Knight, 2010: 181).

Branding then plays a central role in professionalized identity formation. And this tendency to foreground identity:

“[R]einforces a strong moral and ethical dimension to public discourse. Values play a central role in both promotional and subpolitical [or activist] discourse, as is evident in both the communicative practices of a company like Nike and in the claims of its anti-sweatshop critics.” (Knight, 2010: 179)

Thus the very emphasis on identity in the promotional sphere foregrounds reputation. Again, brand and organisation have no choice but to assume an ‘authentic’ relation: the ubiquitous tenet of sustainability communications is that companies must ‘walk the talk’. The very artifice of brand is such that its promotional purpose continually threatens to foreground itself, and with it, the inherent in-authenticity of the promotional. In the game of authenticity, then, commercial brands are structurally at a disadvantage: corporate communication is assumed by its nature to be promotional. It is this problematic that commercial sustainability communications navigates.

A key informant, a brand and sustainability consultant, commenting on the use of branding by NGOs rehearses several of these themes:

“Brands [are] a shorthand version of something but also there’s a more affective, relational element to it which is very important. I think it’s fine for NGOs and charities to use those same constructs. If you want to signal quickly and efficiently and consistently a position on something, trigger some sort of emotional response. And they’re at a disadvantage if they can’t. It’s how we make sense of the stuff around us. I think if anything NGO and charity brands should be stronger because they’re more intrinsically motivated. There’s a hollowness – always that threat of a lack of authenticity – with commercial brands.” (KI-7)

125 Working with Habermas’ terms, Knight argues: “Branding represents the way that communicative action has been subsumed by strategic action but in a way which makes communication itself more central to the design and implementation of strategy” (ibid.182).
“[T]rustworthiness to claims making” (Knight, 2010: 183), and thus opportunities to create trust through communications, become central. The same consultant notes:

“There’s a difference between getting information to your consumer and you being the one [as a brand] that gives the information directly to the consumer. There’s value in the information. But there’s also value in the relationship that delivered the information.” (KI-7)

Beyond this general tendency towards the importance of identity formation and maintenance at work in the promotional public sphere, Knight provides a convincing account of the selection pressures that militate activist civil society organisations towards the brand form. I will list them very briefly. Institutionalisation and professionalisation create a tendency towards organisational isomorphism (Knight, 2010: 184; cf. DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Permanent campaigning tends to reproduce the practices of permanent marketing: including opinion research; the use of communication experts (who themselves, as I demonstrate in Chapter Eight, are carriers of practices militating towards isomorphism); even a market-like approach to the field of issues – cultivating niches, differentiation from incumbents, etc. Further, branding helps to establish distinct identity in order to enhance resource mobilisation—cultural, social and economic capital—and maintain this over “issue attention cycles” (Downs, 1972). So just as commercial brands both integrate identity as a heuristic device for multiple and changing product ranges, and utilise those products to promote brand identity, civil society organisations promote issues through campaigns and utilise campaigns to promote the organisation (Knight, 2010: 185-6).

Commercial brands came to prominence in the nineteenth century as heuristic devices to minimise the “provenance costs” (Champniss and Vila, 2011) of product choice in the context of the dislocations of urbanisation. Activist and civil society brands come to play a similar role in the plurality and informational complexity of the post-bourgeois public sphere.

---

Which is not to claim that this is the only aspect of identity. Knight also argues that as identity in the sense of status—qualification to speak on a given topic—vies with critical rationality as the criterion for evaluation in the public sphere, it comes to resemble a field in Bourdieu’s sense: “an arena marked not only by a determinate set of practices...but also by relations of status competition and power” upon which hierarchies of value are based (Knight 2010: 179-80). Perhaps because commercial brands cannot win a status game with NGOs over sustainability they foreground relations of trust not authority.
We might note one further general point about brands in the promotional public sphere – that the networks that form around the issues they generate may produce novel, globally dispersed publics. I do not mean here “brand communities” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) that form around commercial brands. Rather, the dispersed networks that form through anti-brand activism around issues linked through a brand, such as Coca Cola’s alleged complicity in the murder of trade unionists in Colombia, its use of water resources in rural India, and activist groups in Europe and the US.127

10.4.3 Conclusion: Identity and Authenticity in the Public Sphere

The public sphere is, I have suggested, a site of sustainability communications, in Schatzki’ s (2002: 64-65) sense of the term, and thus an adequate account of the field of sustainability communications must engage with it. In this section, I have provided a framework in which to think about sustainability communications’ engagement with the complex articulations of sustainability and brand in the public sphere. I am not arguing that all of sustainability communications’ engagements with the public sphere are through the medium of brand. However, it is a very important mode, and in addressing brand-sustainability relations in the public sphere I foreground important wider dynamics that sustainability communications navigates and helps constitute.

There is, then, a general tendency towards the importance of identity formation and maintenance at work in the promotional public sphere, which we see professionalised as branding. That same tendency, however, militates towards an ethical dimension. The ethical dimension also partakes of the general structure of authenticity, or relations of inside and outside, central to both self-identity (and thus mobilised in “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988)) and in brand identity. Sustainability, whether in corporate initiatives or programmes of self-conduct, is an important resource for these projects of authenticity, marshalled by sustainability communications practitioners – experts in professionalised identity formation, the source material of sustainability, and the articulation of the two.

127 I take this point from Foster, who makes it in relation to products rather than brands; the example is his (Foster 2012: 54).
10.5 Conclusion to Chapter Ten: Intermediating Sustainability through Brand

In this extended chapter I have explored three important arenas in which sustainability communications is involved in articulating together notions of brand and sustainability and in which it can be seen to play a performative role. Sustainability communications is deeply entwined with these processes and seeks to realise its normative orientations within them. Of course it encounters multiple conflicts and constraints in doing so and the discursive positions it takes are polyvalent. But the inherent normativity of sustainability is disruptive and problematises attempts at its recuperation.

The brand complex is an order of magnitude more powerful than that of sustainability communications. It can be said to be part of Carrier and Miller’s “virtualism” (and has demonstrated a powerful capacity to make the world conform to its conceptual structures (Carrier, 1998). Sustainability’s increasing entanglement with brand is therefore also an entanglement with this performative assemblage, making the issue of the cultural intermediation of sustainability communications ever more pertinent.

I have argued that in the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption we can glimpse the contours of new teleological regime challenging the emancipatory-consumer discourse that came to full fruition in the 1960s. I have suggested that this may serve as a new ethical project for commercial communications as a whole, beyond the normative orientations of sustainability communications. But sustainability serves a far more important role for corporate capitalism than this. I have suggested we can see in its mobilisation with technologies of brand in the cultural politics of work it is deployed as a legitimating discourse. At the same time, that technology militates towards corporations’ increasingly engagements with sustainability.

Similarly, in the promotional public sphere (Knight, 2010) a general tendency towards the importance of identity formation and maintenance militates towards an ethical dimension. Corporate sustainability communications generate brand associations through narratives in the promotional public sphere and in everyday life in order to establish the legitimacy of brands as intermediaries of popular citizen-consumer concerns around sustainability. As Holt puts it:

“[B]rands act as parasites riding the coat-tails of other more powerful cultural forms, but then use their market power to proselytize these ideological revisions. Through ubiquity and repetition, brands transform emergent culture into dominant norms.” (Holt, 2006b: 355)
The ethical dimension of identity, whether that of brands or individuals, partakes of the general structure of authenticity, or relations of inside and outside. Sustainability is an important resource for these projects of authenticity. Authenticity, moreover, links brand, sustainability, consumption and technologies of the self in a complex web. A meta-narrative of commodification (Williams, 2005), as is often implicit in both critiques of promotionalism (e.g. Wernick, 1991) and accounts of neoliberal governmentality, does little justice to the complexity of these relationships, and in doing so potentially misses the possibilities for radical transformation in the contingency of practice-order relationships.

Social media and ubiquitous communication technologies are transforming the way in which brands seek to interact with their consumers and in which publics and movements are formed and effect change. Many suggest optimistic possibilities for how both social media and the logic of authenticity (e.g. Holt, 2002) will drive the agenda of transparency in corporate behaviour which forms a central tenet of sustainability communications. The model of consumer co-production of brand value when it draws on the resources of a discourse of sustainability draws on a discourse that problematises consumption and refuses to accept current legislative definitions of corporate responsibility and legitimate externalities, suggesting positive disruptive potential.

Thus far corporate efforts to actually engage with sustainable consumption in any serious way have been marginal. But we should take seriously the ambitions expressed by powerful think tanks and lobby groups such as the World Economic Forum and the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. Such organisations, indeed the latter specifically, have historically played an important role in shaping the international sustainability policy agenda. Their ambitions and programmes matter. And attempts, on whatever level, to facilitate transitions or agitate for transformations towards genuine sustainability will take place in the context of their claims to speak in the name of sustainability.
Chapter Eleven: Conclusions—Cultural Intermediation, Sustainability and Practice Theory

11.1 Addressing the Research Questions

In Chapter Two I set out the key questions that framed my research project and the writing of this thesis. In this section I offer a brief summary response to the historical, institutional and ethnographic questions. In the following sections, in response to the theoretical questions, I offer further conclusions, reflections and conjectures, presented in the context of cultural economy, cultural intermediation and sustainable consumption. Lastly, I reflect on what I consider the theoretical optimism offered by practice theory in the face of the systemic crisis of sustainability, and suggest some avenues for future engagement and research.

Historical What historical accounts are necessary to explain the discourses and understandings employed in the practice of commercial sustainability communications? What accounts are necessary to explain why the practices are performed as they are?

In order to explain the phenomenon of sustainability communications we must trace the origins of the components of practice that characterise it as a new practice complex, as I have done in Chapters Four and Five. The general understandings which add a novel normative orientation to the commercial communications practices of which it is composed are widely diffused in contemporary culture – an ecological understanding of social-natural inter-relationships and a problematised understanding of consumption. We find these widely diffused via the environmental movement to discourses of corporate sustainability and as popular cultural discourse. In the case of commercial sustainability communications they are mobilised in a normative, advocative, project that in addition has aesthetic and economic ends. This project issues from two other key historical sources – branding and marketing communications on the one hand and CSR on the other; it adopts constituent practices from both and hybridises understandings from one to the other. Thus from branding it draws an ideal of organisational identity as a coherent aesthetic and cultural assemblage, put to work to integrate relations of inside and outside on the very general cultural model of authenticity (as we saw in Chapter Ten). From CSR it draws an ideal of (again authentic) communication as ‘transparency’ concerning environmental and social impacts through dialogue with multiple stakeholder groups (as we saw in Chapter Eight).
Each historical development might in addition be usefully thought of as addressing a distinct problematisation pertinent to the field. For environmentalism, the problematisation is that of defending a “lifeworld threatened by man’s use of nature” (Eder, 1996: 207). For CSR, the proper object of its attention has long been disputed, and relations of society and business have never been unproblematic; however, for my purposes the key problematisation is that of the firm’s responsibility to address its externalities. As Fitch has it: “Corporate social responsibility is defined as the serious attempt to solve social problems caused wholly or in part by the corporation” (Fitch, 1976: 38, in Carroll, 1999: 281). Lastly, brand management can be said to address the problematisation of the firm’s identity and reputation, and the problematic of valorizing these as intangible assets.

**Institutional and Ethnographic** How are the practices performed? What are the conflicts and constraints involved in their performance? Which discourses and understandings are employed, and which discourses and understandings are excluded? How are notions of the consumer, brand and sustainable consumption articulated through these practices? How is the micro perspective of ethnographic research articulated with the macro perspective of larger systems? What is the relation of this specific social world to historical change?

As well as the constituent practices inherited from these historical contexts, integrated in novel fashion with general cultural understandings, there are discursive components at the level of, in Warde’s (2005) terms, procedure and engagement, novel to sustainability communications itself. As Section 7.3 addressed, these circulate amongst constituent practices through co-location and the performance of practice, integrating the constituent practices into an identifiable practice complex.

There are a range of discursive positions within the field, from a version of neoliberal corporate responsibility, to a critical ecological critique of contemporary capitalism, to an ameliorative, social democratic discourse. The distribution of these positions, at the level of the organisational actor, is to some degree predictable – thus organisations serving a corporate client base tend to have discursive positions more closely aligned with an economic rationality. But there are exceptions and the inherent normativity of sustainability tends to a disruptive logic; as Amsler puts it, it “evokes critical reflection on the desirability of present social conditions and creates possibilities for imagining alternative futures” (2009: 115). Or as Fleming notes:

“If [CSR] is taken at all seriously and made into a reality, it would definitively spell the demise of corporate capitalism as we know it today.” (2009: 100)
While sustainability communications actors are constrained by the economic imperative of operating within the market it is also to a degree their normative orientation that enables their unique jurisdiction as brokers of the strategic ambiguity of sustainability. It is not therefore the case that there is any simple equation between the discourse of clients and the discourse of consultants.

Sustainability communications is articulated with larger systems—corporate capitalism, the public sphere—through cultural intermediation, operating in a number of senses. Sustainability communications actors can be seen as carriers of certain types of practice and components of practice—specifically from the complexes of brand and CSR—which enact isomorphic processes across client organisations. Prefigurative intermediation—usually conceptualised as capacity to enable or constrain discursive positions—operates in complex ways discussed below. Here it suffices to recall I have examined ways in which brand and sustainability are imbricated in the novel discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, the cultural politics of work and in the promotional public sphere. I have also addressed ways in which sustainability communications mobilises and frames consuming subjects, as it seek to intervene in consumption. Lastly, sustainability communications relates to historical change primarily through, on the one hand, its purposive interventions framed within its normative project, and on the other, through the work to which it is put by corporate capitalism.

11.2 Cultural Economy

The term cultural economy is used to marshal two quite different meanings. Firstly, it refers to the examination of processes of “de-differentiation of culture and economy” (Lash and Urry, 1994: 8). This sense runs into the problem that “economic and cultural categories are logically and practically interdependent...neither can be reduced to, or separated from, the other” for the simple reason that economic objects can only be defined through extensive forms of cultural knowledge (Slater, 2002a: 59; cf. Warde, 2002). The second sense is to examine economic arrangements and things as cultural products, and to ask how they are defined and secured through expert knowledges (Tonkiss, 2007). It is to this second project that the thesis contributes, through the analysis of a novel field of cultural production that has thus far received extremely limited critical attention. The application of practice orientated approaches to cultural production is not uncommon. The stricter application of a practice based social ontology to such analysis is, however, unusual. It has been attempted as an experiment in extending the practice theory approach applied to final use consumption in the sociology of sustainable consumption to expert knowledge practices in a field of cultural production which is itself central to sustainable consumption.
I suggest practice theory’s heuristic value is less obvious when so applied, although I believe this thesis demonstrates some novel findings that are a direct result of the particular focus practice theory affords. If we are to provide a coherent, synthetic account of these different areas of the wider field of sustainable consumption, namely cultural production and end use, we must approach both from a unified theoretical position. Moreover, if we take social ontology seriously and are persuaded by the practice theoretical account, we have no choice but to deploy it.

The field of sustainability communications looks set, at least in the medium term, to grow in significance in cultural and economic life. It is unusual in the degree to which it serves to entangle normative orientations with the economic; which orientations, in the current balance of forces, serve both to disrupt some of the most fundamental premises upon which the current economic order is based, and at the same time are being marshalled as a legitimating discourse of that order.

11.2.1 The Marketisation of Communication?

There is a long history to the concern with the marketisation of communication (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno, [1944] 1972; Marcuse, [1964] 1991; Packard, [1957] 2007; Habermas, 1991) and a widespread cultural suspicion regarding promotional techniques. Contemporary critics deploy their own expert knowledge to finesse these concerns. Such accounts, however, often seem to engage in a genetic fallacy – conflating the communicative practice with its original market purpose, without examining the mutation of practices along the way. Thus for Moor, that social marketing draws on commercial marketing techniques —such as consumer segmentation— “raises important questions about the extension of market models to ostensibly non-commercial spheres” (2012: 299). Similarly, the spread of brand —the “emblematic cultural form” of promotional culture (Aronczyk and Powers, 2010: 5)—from capitalist enterprises to public and civil society organisations is routinely conflated with the adoption of the “conceptual apparatus of neoliberalism”, privatisation and rhetorical manipulation (ibid.: 6). Given the inter-related rise of brands and neoliberalism this is hardly surprising. But does such criticism really address the technology of branding itself? Sustainability communications, with its entanglements with corporate capitalism, marketisation of environmental communication and enthusiastic propagation of the brand form, no doubt appears deeply suspect from such a position.

The claims to normativity of sustainability communications, in themselves, obviously say nothing about the field’s role in processes of marketisation or collusion with neoliberalism. However, I would argue we need to take seriously the normative orientation of sustainability communications to
apprehend it as a cultural phenomenon. Certainly normative commitments vary considerably across the field but a defining feature of it as a novel practice complex is its engagement in a normative project and an entangling of normative and economic ends. In *Promotional Culture* Wernick wrote “any strategy of promotional limitation evidently depends on releasing cultural production from its overwhelmingly commercial imperative” (1991: 193). Creative sustainability communications certainly seeks to deploy promotional techniques, but it does so not solely from a commercial imperative. Overwhelmingly, those I have interviewed for this research regard what they do as being engaged in a normative project:

“If I was ever to leave, unless I went to one of the other agencies that I know are comparable [ethically] I don’t think [communications is] actually an environment I’d work in…I can’t imagine going and working for an agency which was just about commercial gain.” (Junior Account Manager, the Agency)

Agencies have to turn a profit, people need to make a living – these are the negotiations of everyday normativity. Thus the MD of the Agency discussed the difficulty of judging whether to turn down commissions, on the basis of his ecological politics:

“We were asked to work on this project about carbon capture and storage, and it was a tough one we had to really think it through and me and [the CEO] both went to the meeting and did loads of research and eventually we said ‘Well, on balance, where we’re at the moment this is a technology we need, so we’ll do it’ and we went back to explain it to the team. But then we were asked to do this thing on nuclear – and it was from [the Climate Change Centre] who we’ve done loads of work with but we had to say ‘Sorry, we just don’t do nuclear’. But that’s a tough call when you know there are twenty mortgages to pay.” (KI-13)

In his critique of the meta-narrative of commodification Williams suggests that: “reading monetized exchange as always profit-motivated serves the interests of both neoliberals, whose belief is that this must be met with open arms, and radical theorists, who use this as a call to arms to resist further encroachment” (2005: 65). He suggests that the growth of the not-for-profit sector (admittedly in the context of a withdrawal of the state as the direct provider of goods and services) and “alternative economic spaces” contest the neat divisions of modes of provision and suggests “the messy and complex nature of monetary exchange in late modern society” (2005: 68). So amongst other collective actors in the field we encounter: the charity engaged in sustainability
communications solely for the business sector; the not-for-profit workers’ co-operative engaged in consulting for a corporate client; and the for-profit Agency that turns down clients on ethical grounds, and charges different banded fees for for-profit, not-for-profit and ‘grassroots’ clients.

Thus far I have been referring to the agency market, but corporate sustainability communications do not present a simple picture either. Corporate communication around sustainability is caught in the problematic that corporate communication is expected to be promotional and is therefore rhetorically suspect. One reception study of “corporate responsibility advertising” from 1997—an interesting juncture, at the start of the rapid diffusion of CSR—found “corporate communication is facing serious legitimation problems with the general public...if corporate responsibility advertising is a strategy designed to anticipate the emergence of a popular consumer politics...to immunise...from...such politics, the present study shows it is doubtful whether it is accomplishing its goal” (Schroder, 1997: 289). CSR communication attempted to counter this problem by appealing to a normative orientation around ‘transparency’ and ‘materiality’ thus distancing itself from the promotional. Earlier, for example, I cited one brand manager in charge of the company’s CSR report complain that his attempts to improve the style of reporting was routinely rejected as “sounding like marketing” (KI-10). CSR communication to a large degree defines itself against the promotional.

In 1996 Klaus Eder noted: “The environmental movement no longer dominates the discourse of the environment” and asked, “Can the environmental movements now survive this marketplace of communication on the environment?” (1996: 203). Clearly sustainability communications is the marketisation of environmental communication. But what, exactly, does this mean? Ironically, in relation to Eder’s question, environmental organisations are an important part of sustainability communications’ client base. Furthermore, one could suggest that to see the rise of the agency market as a process of commodification exaggerates the discontinuity with previous practice. Environmental NGOs were already using marketing techniques to mobilise resources from their supporters, in order to deploy promotional communications in the public sphere. The obvious distinction here would be that the NGO seeks to communicate its own message, not that of a paying client. But this is a gross simplification—the client is not simply paying an agency to communicate a pre-established message—but to advise of the message itself, wherein sustainability

128 See Section 8.5 for an explanation of materiality in this context.
communications seeks to engage in its normative project. Thus we come to issue of cultural intermediation.

### 11.3 Cultural Intermediation

There is a pervasive acceptance of the power of cultural intermediaries in contemporary cultural analysis. Thus in the introduction to a recent collection on the role of branding Aronczyk and Powers comment: “As promotional intermediaries...become the central actors of contemporary culture, concerns over authenticity have come to the fore” (2011: 16). But there is little empirical attention applied to the processes whereby cultural intermediaries enact their alleged power, or to the conceptualisation of that power.

Processes of cultural intermediation are often posed in terms of the figure of enablement and constraint. Schatzki suggests that the prominence that this figure has acquired in social theory “is the desire to identify another form of determination in social life than causality” (2002: 45). Foucault’s notion of power is one such example: “To govern...is to structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982: 220 in Schatzki, 2002: 45). Schatzki calls this type of social relation prefiguration: “how the world channels forthcoming activity” (2002: 44) or “the difference that the present makes to the nascent future” (2011: 10).

However, Schatzki rejects the constraint\enablement figure as a model for prefiguration: “The mesh of practices does not simply clear some paths and obliterate others” (2005: 226). Rather, “present states of affair qualify forthcoming activity on registers as easier and harder, more and less expensive, nobler and base, more or less time consuming” (2011: 10) ”...more threatening or welcoming...more cognitively dissonant or soothing” (Schatzki, 2005: 226; cf.2001: 45; 2005, especially 45-46, 98-99).

Is there a legitimate level of generalisation about prefigurative relations between sustainability communications and the wider phenomena of, for example, brand-sustainability relations? I would suggest that only more detailed empirical overviews than can be afforded here would legitimate strong claims in this area. However, the account of cultural intermediation presented in this thesis offers analytical insights beyond the usual, normative critiques of the role of commercial communications in corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption.

---

129 Schatzki suggests five basic types of social relation—causality, constitution, intentionality, intelligibility and prefiguration—that link practice to practice and material arrangement to material arrangement, as well that form the linkages of practice-order bundles (2011: 11-12).
Normative critiques of corporate sustainability and sustainable consumption (both popular and academic) commonly assume the form of boundary work distinguishing between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sustainabilities. More often than not these are equated to ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ sustainabilities, or between “incremental reforms to the status quo” and “radical reorganization and restructuring of society along ecological principles” (Amsler, 2009: 111). Such questions are far from irrelevant but asking whether sustainability communications, on balance, instantiates weak or strong sustainability does little to capture the processes this research has observed. I have identified other, generally more subtle, forms of cultural intermediation than those posed by normative critiques, which I summarise below.

**Managing the strategic ambiguity of sustainability**

Sustainability communications seeks to police the limits of acceptability of that ambiguity for the emergent coalition of sustainability. It acts as an interface between the citizen-consumer activism of civil society organisations and commercial brands, and articulates the strategic goals of organisations that are part of the coalition within the boundaries of acceptable ambiguity (see Section 6.4). Contravention of these limits often provokes accusations of ‘greenwash’. While such accusations represent a reaction to exploiting ambiguity for the purpose of misrepresentation we also find the management of ambiguity in sustainability communications’ general refusal to explicitly foreground values, which we can see as the maintenance of ambiguity.

**Diffusion of practices and understandings**

The most obvious form of cultural intermediation is the diffusion of practices (such as cycling to work) and understandings (such as the problematisation of consumption), which is often the instrumental aim of sustainability communications, for example in behaviour change or employee engagement programmes. Such diffusion may take the form of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), as we saw in Chapter Eight, where the process of CSR report writing demands the adoption by the firm of novel practices. In this important instance it was noted that the process of intermediation is less one of discursive struggle between different sustainabilities than the attempt to translate wholesale the assemblage of practices and understandings that is CSR reporting. We also find institutional isomorphism in the diffusion of brand practices. For example, in Section 7.2 it was noted that the fieldwork Agency to a large degree built its market amongst third sector organisations by acting as a carrier of brand practices to this sector.
Instantiating the sustainable consumer

Collective social actors frame and mobilise ‘the sustainable consumer’ for their own ends (see Chapter Nine). Commercial sustainability communications agencies both provide expert services to enable these ends and are themselves such actors. In Section 9.7 I identify four analytically distinct modes of instantiation enacted by sustainability communications: reflexive; enabling; didactic; and advocative segmentation. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between the subject of consumption addressed by sustainability communications outside of the specific articulation as ‘consumer’ (e.g. as ‘citizen’ or ‘employee’) and ‘the sustainable consumer’ qua consumer. In many instances the subject of consumption can be seen to be articulated by sustainability communications from within a ‘naive’ practice approach to consumption. However, we can identify a tendency whereby, when framed as ‘the sustainable consumer’ (as opposed to, for example, ‘the employee’), the implicit ontological model tends to default to the “portfolio model of the actor” (Hindess, 1988; Warde and Southerton, 2012; Whitford, 2002).

The marshalling of sustainability in projects of governmentality

Sustainability communications provides resources for commercial brands in their appeals for authenticity – directed both externally to consumers and internally to workers (Holt, 2002; Fleming, 2009). Brand management can be seen to be implicated in a form of governmentality in which it seeks to draw subjects into active processes of ‘co-production’ of the brand (Arvidsson, 2007; Zwick et al, 2008; see Section 2.4.3). Sustainability provides a powerful resource for such endeavours; moreover, practices promoting corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption (see Section 10.2) often take the form of brand practices of co-production. Corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, therefore, seeks to intensify processes through which brand practices become important in the social world. However we should note with caution here that in mapping governmental rationalities and technologies we are attending to programmes of power, not to their successful instantiation. As Miller and Rose note, governmentality “is a congenitally failing operation” (2008: 17; cf. Barnett, 2009; Barnett et al., 2008, 2011)

Articulation of sustainability in the promotional public sphere

Many of the above processes are conducted within and are constitutive of the mediatised “promotional public sphere” (Knight, 2010). In the promotional public sphere brands (both commercial and non-commercial) are the institutional vehicles most appropriately structured to succeed in articulating citizen-consumer concerns. Sustainability communications, then, has a particular significance in providing many of the animating expert practices of these promotional
vehicles. As such it plays an important role in the overall dissemination of discourses and practices of sustainability to publics.

### 11.3 Sustainable Consumption

I have suggested that the sociology of sustainable consumption needs an understanding of the dynamics of the field of sustainability communications—which engages with purposive interventions into the field of sustainable consumption—if it is to provide an adequate account. In identifying the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, and its attempts to operationalise itself in employee and consumer facing engagements, we witness emerging technologies which seek to shape sustainable consumption in ways conducive to the reproduction of the existing economic order. However, the inherent normativity of sustainability, the contradictions between an ecological understanding and an economic model dependent on externalities, as well as the problematisation of consumption inherent to it, offer continual disruption. As a very senior corporate sustainability expert put it, discussing the ambiguity of sustainability:

> “Of course the most fundamental ambiguity for most businesses is that the most sustainable thing they could do is do less of what they do...so it’s very ambiguous!” (KI-8)

Whether this emergent identity—sustainability communications—will stabilise in the longer term remains to be seen. I suspect it will continue to stabilise further in the immediate future, chiefly through institutional consolidation within corporations and academia. Several of my key informants when asked to speculate on the field’s future suggested it would move from niche to mainstream practice and in doing so lose its current identity as a recognisable sub-field of commercial communications. Others felt that the failure of marketing and advertising, and business in general, to genuinely attend to the challenges of sustainability meant it would remain as a specialism for the foreseeable future.

Hargreaves (2011) demonstrates, through an ethnographic study of an environmental behaviour change programme in a business, how the specific ‘sustainability’ elements of meaning in everyday ‘pro-environmental’ activities (such as recycling and turning off lights) may become largely evacuated from discourse even when those changes in everyday practices successfully result from a purposive programme contextualised within a discourse of sustainability. In this case, these changed practices became invested with meanings of loyalty to company culture, rather than allegiance to a wider environmental politics.
This example demonstrates how the discourse of sustainability may not be enduring in particular contexts, even where purposive programmes have made practices more sustainable. It is, of course, entirely possible to imagine (or find) environmentally sustainable social worlds where no-one talks of sustainability. Indeed our contemporary condition suggests that there is an inverse relation between the prevalence of discourses of sustainability and the material sustainability of the societies that those discourses inhabit.

11.5 Conclusion

“From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even...all...societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as boni patres familias.”

Marx, Capital Volume 3 (1991: 911)

Post the financial crash, in the current legitimation crisis of capitalism, and post Copenhagen and ‘Rio +20’, in the wake of the total failure of global environmental governance, sustainability perhaps offers capitalism the best option for a legitimating discourse. At the same time, in the face of mounting, systemic ecological and economic crises, will the emergent coalition of corporate sustainability hold together? And if it does not what is the fate of the discourse of sustainability itself? I suspect that the global failure to ameliorate the environmental crisis will relatively soon radically reconfigure relations between the agendas of ‘mitigation’ and ‘adaptation’ such that the discourse of sustainability loses its current prominence to other discursive formations—resilience, perhaps?

However, for the present, sustainability is the only game in town. Two prominent theoretical orientations in much of the contemporary literature with which I have engaged for this project—governmentality and autonomist notions of the common (which space has not allowed me to explore)—translate into generally pessimistic readings of the possibilities for the social, cultural and economic transformation necessary if we are to avert the worst of the crises of sustainability that are upon us (e.g. Arvidsson, 2007; Fleming, 2009; cf. Thoburn, 2001). They present models in which power is invested through the capillaries of the social, as Foucault (1980: 99) had it, and in which some inherent, reified structure of capital recuperates and co-opts all oppositional forces. In fact both models have profoundly optimistic interpretations as well, in which governmentality’s reliance
on the production of free subjects introduces radical instability to the system (as brand managers tend to aver when discussing consumer co-production), and the common offers radical excess to capital’s recuperative engine.

One might argue, to paraphrase William Burroughs, that whether one is pessimistic or optimistic is irrelevant when the ship is sinking - and the Captain has escaped on the first lifeboat dressed as a woman. However, in our current cultural malaise I think optimism does matter, because it is deeply performativive. I find something profoundly optimistic in the social ontology of practice theory. To embrace that social ontology is to recognise, while taking deadly seriously materiality and path dependency in socio-technical regimes, that seemingly monolithic macro entities, like the state, exist only through their praxiological instantiations (Coulter, 2001) and that dominant social phenomena, such as capital, are (to step out on a very long theoretical limb) the emergent, aggregate effects of interactions among many different kinds of social practice that form a distinct, but ultimately contingent, regime. This raises the possibility that certain kinds of praxiological instantiation may be refused, or transformed, and that era-defining aggregate processes may be disassembled and “component practices appropriated and repurposed to create a more emancipatory whole” (Pepperell, 2010: 18).

I have therefore attempted this thesis in a spirit of theoretical optimism, against the obvious possibility of presenting a normative critique. I take seriously the inherent, disruptive normativity of the ambiguous space of sustainability and have largely therefore declined the boundary work of policing good and bad sustainabilities. Something is afoot when a recent poll of “qualified sustainability experts” — the senior bureaucrats of the emergent coalition, as it were—found that, in Europe, 44% agreed, against 40% disagreed, that there was “an inherent conflict between economic growth and sustainable consumption” (Globescan, 2012). A cadre within corporate capitalism itself, therefore, rejects the fundamental premise on which ongoing capital accumulation lies. Thus we find Gavin Neath, Senior VP Communications & Sustainability of Unilever (admittedly probably the most forward thinking global corporation in terms of sustainability), writing in a comment piece in Greenpeace Business:

“The prevailing Anglo-American model of capitalism, characterised by its obsession with growth and its focus on the short term, is completely unsustainable. It is unsustainable

---

130 Of respondents in the corporate sector 29% agreed against 56% disagreed.
in its use of the planet’s resources. It is unsustainable with regard to the extremes of wealth and poverty that it creates.” (Neath, 2008)

This said, how do we approach the discourse of corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption, which looks set, at least in the immediate term, to play a significant role in attempting to define, influence and format sustainable consumption? There is an adage of, appropriately, retail marketing, that is apposite here. Never put a clock up on the shop wall. You don’t want to remind the customers they need to be somewhere else. Clocks are the paradigmatic practice co-ordinating device of the modern age. You are unlikely to see them in the paradigmatic consumer institution of the modern age. The parable of the missing clocks suggests that we approach corporate-sponsored sustainable consumption in terms of what Althusser called a “lacuna discourse” (1971: 143): it is not that what is said is untrue, it is that what is not said suggests untruth. It colludes in what we might call, borrowing from Erich Fromm, the "pathology of normalcy" (2010) - the illusion that we are living in an ordinary world in ordinary times.

Finally, I would like to very briefly suggest some avenues for future research. Firstly, the encounter between practice theory and neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) is only gestured at here, in relation to the institutionalisation of CSR. There is a productive dialogue to be had here (see Schatzki, 2005) and while some organisational researchers have sought to integrate the two approaches (e.g. Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007) there has been less innovation from the practice side. The CSR report could be a useful research site for dialogue between neo-institutional and practice theory approaches. The CSR report is co-ordinative of multiple practices and offers a plethora of transposable metrics. Indeed such metrics can now be found in everything from consumer guides, such as Ethical Consumer and the Good Guide, to Bloomberg financial terminals (see Marquis et al, 2011). Shove et al. note that structurally similar devices have created cascading effects “spread rapidly through the media, fuelled by the potential to benchmark and compare” (2012: 116). No doubt many of the pioneers of CSR hoped for such an effect. However, despite the enormous infrastructure to create them, CSR reports have not created significant wider effects.

Consumers and investors remain indifferent, much to the changrin of CSR professionals and forward thinking CEOs. Investigating the failure of sustainability metrics to have a transformational effect

---

131 The metaphor was suggested by Edwards (2012).
would contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of sustainability transitions, as well as inform both policy and CSR practice.\footnote{For an optimistic speculation on the potential of non-financial metrics see Arvidsson (2010).}

A second possible avenue of research is to address how diffuse but extremely important cultural concepts such as authenticity circulate and help structure practices. Such fundamental cultural concepts are not just any other general understandings because they map fundamental conceptual shapes that have profound consequences for such diverse phenomena as our discursive constructions of self, how we understand sustainability and how brands operate – and arguably relations between these phenomena.

Thirdly, I am profoundly uncomfortable with how the social ontology of practice theory disposes of fundamental economic phenomena, such as capital. Schatzki offers limited resources here. The question of whether “flat ontology” is compatible with an adequate explanation of the economic requires considerable work. Is there room for a hierarchical ordering of practices within the model (see Swidler, 2001)? What additional conceptual resources are necessary? Is a fundamental critique required to address the social ontology’s adequacy to the economic?

Turning to a perhaps less daunting topic, McMeekin and Southerton (2012) have recently discussed the fruitful possibility of the integration between the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) on socio-technical transitions (e.g. Geels, 2010) and practice approaches to consumption, for the study of the dynamics of sustainability transitions. They note that MLP proponents have addressed mechanisms that integrate production and consumption and their significance for understanding socio-technical transitions by recognising the importance of the mediating space between the two. Their suggestion to extend the conceptualisation of the role of mediators to address their capacity to shape practice elements has obvious resonance with my own work. Commercial communications could be a productive site for this work of integration. Further, research addressing the role of communications in specific transitions may uncover dynamics that inform where communicative interventions may be transformative, ineffectual or innoculatory.

Finally, there is the possibility of explicitly taking the practice approach back into sustainability communications to inform its interventions. As I have suggested, in many cases sustainability communications operates with such an understanding of social action, so it is not a case of theory deigning to contribute to real world problems, it is a possibility for productive dialogue between cultural production and cultural theory.
Appendices

Appendix I: Key Informant Profiles

I provide here brief profiles of the key informant interviewees. While the most salient details of the key informants’ professional history are included in the following, certain professional roles have been omitted in certain cases in the interests of preserving anonymity. Text in quotation marks denotes either personal or organisational self-description.

**KI-1.**

Male, early 60s

KI-1 is a freelance “corporate sustainability expert” and Associate Director of a “corporate sustainability strategy and communications” consultancy of which he was a Director between 2005-2010. The consultancy, founded in the UK in 1997, has a team of eighteen, largely based in London (covering a European market), as well as offices in New York and Los Angeles, and specialises in multi-national corporate clients. He is also a Non-executive Director of a well established ethical investment research house.

KI-1 began his career as an accountant, went on to do an MBA and eventually became a business journalist. After 12 years as a business correspondent with *the Guardian*, he left to go freelance in order to concentrate on the topics of CSR and sustainability. He was a successful freelance journalist for six years before joining the consultancy.

KI-1 provided a valuable long term perspective on the development of corporate sustainability as well as first-hand knowledge of an important sustainability communications agency, and insights into the field in the round.

**KI-2.**

Female, 47

KI-2 is a freelance “sustainability consultant” with 14 years expertise in sustainability policy at national and regional level. KI-2 was selected as an informant largely on the basis of her former role at DEFRA (1997-2009) heading sustainability reporting for the Government Estate, from the inception of the role; as well as heading up policy research on the “Evidence Base for Sustainable Consumption and Production”. She was also head of one of the Regional Environment Offices set up
under the Labour Government to co-ordinate regional and national environmental policy initiatives (and subsequently abolished by the Coalition Government).

KI-2 provided valuable input on sustainability reporting from a public sector perspective and on the historical development of sustainability reporting per se, as well as on the relation between government policy and business, and on the role of consultants.

Before joining DEFRA, KI-2 undertook a PhD in geology.

KI-3.

Male, 47

KI-3 began his career as an account manager in a London advertising agency, where he worked 1987-1991, mainly with “Fast Moving Consumer Goods” brands. He left advertising to undertake a PhD in creative writing. Following this, in 1999 he briefly took a communications position with a green charity called Earth 2000 before moving on to the brand and marketing team of a major blue chip UK company. There he undertook a number of “green and CSR projects” before becoming the Head of Brand, and a specialist in “brand valuation” from the inception of the concept. After nine years with the company he left for a job in an academic marketing department, as well as freelancing as a brand communications consultant.

KI-3 offered an unusual perspective as both a former Greenpeace activist and advertising account manager who had pursued “green” projects long before ‘sustainability communications’ existed. As the Head of Brand for a major global company, with strong personal views on sustainability, he offered insight into brand management and the corporate perspective.

KI-4.

Male, 44

KI-4 has been a freelance “CSR communications consultant” for nine years, during which time he has been: an “Associate Consultant” with a prestigious “international corporate sustainability agency” which focuses on strategic advice; as well as a “Values Consultant” for the Body Shop, where he worked two days a week for four years. Prior to going freelance, he had, for six years, been the Director of Consulting of a “niche ethical design and communications company”. He had joined the company in 1996, where he headed up environmental and, subsequently, CSR services (as that field developed). Here KI-4 was responsible for writing some of the earliest organisational environmental
and CSR reports in the UK, including those in the pilot study that became the Global Reporting Initiative (the main global standards for CSR and sustainability reports).

In his twenties he had worked for two years with Greenpeace in Canada, before returning to the UK in 1991 where he volunteered with Friends of the Earth (FoE). He was given a job with FoE as press officer and administrator, and worked his way up over six years to lead its campaigns on pollution and freedom of information.

In 2000 he completed an MSc in the Public Understanding of Environmental Change at University College London.

KI-4 is an influential figure in the development of CSR reporting in the UK, with first-hand experience of the emergence of not only sustainability communications as a field, but of the emergence of ‘communications agencies’ per se. He offered insight into the several important organisations with which he was and is involved, as well as into the evolving relations between NGOs and corporates, which he knew from both sides.

KI-5.

Male, 50

KI-5 is the co-founder of a small NGO dedicated to issues of ethical consumerism and trade justice. He has worked in the organisation for his whole career, from its founding in 1987, as a researcher, writer and editor of the organisation’s flagship consumer and campaigner orientated magazine. As well as producing independent research into the social, ethical and environmental records of companies, the organisation undertakes consultancy projects for companies and other NGOs.

Before founding the organisation, KI-5 undertook a Bachelor of Laws degree and was active in the Anti-Apartheid Movements’ consumer boycott campaigns.

KI-5 is an acknowledged ‘opinion leader’ in the field of ethical consumption with a detailed first-hand knowledge of NGO and civil society challenges to the corporate world from the mid ’80s onward, as well as the evolving responses of the corporate world to those challenges. He also provided valuable insights from the position of a consultant to corporations.
KI-6.

Male, 38

KI-6 is currently a freelance “sustainable development communications professional” having in the previous two years: had a six month contract as “Senior Sustainability Communications Consultant” at a major independent corporate “strategy, sustainability and communications” agency; and for over a year been Communications Director for a leading “sustainability and branding agency” during its integration into a major global communications group. Previously, between 2007-2010, he had been Media and Publications manager at a “leading sustainable development NGO” which works with business and government. For two years prior to that, he had been a freelance journalist and copywriter. He had moved into writing after a successful career as a music video producer.

He has a BA in Human Communication and Drama.

As well as nuanced views of the field from professional experience, KI-6 provided valuable comparative insights into the different agencies with which he had worked.

KI-7.

Male, 46

KI-7 is a “brand strategy and communications consultant” with a particular focus on sustainability and consumer behaviour. After a successful 10 year career as a TV producer, KI-7 undertook a prestigious MBA programme (2003-2004) in order to change career. Here he was introduced to ideas of CSR and sustainability. Following the MBA he joined one of the major global communications groups, quickly becoming “Global Director Strategic Marketing & Entertainment” and then Global Director of the group’s Media division. He was the company’s representative to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

In 2007 he left direct employment with the Group, becoming a “brand strategy and communications planning consultant” to the Group’s CEO and global research team, focusing on the development of branding and communication strategies around corporate responsibility, sustainability and consumer behaviour. He also acts as a consultant to a major global “stakeholder relations consultancy” which has a significant sustainability strategy service offering. Recently he has launched a company specialising in brand, communications and consumer behaviour strategy.
In 2009 he undertook the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership and is currently undertaking a PhD in Strategic Marketing.

KI-7 provided insight into brand, sustainability and communications not only on an intellectual level but through first-hand experience at the most senior levels of a top ten global communications group.

KI-8.

Male, 49

KI-8 is the CEO and founder of a mid-size environmental charity that works with businesses on sustainability strategy and communications, focusing particularly on employee engagement. Founded in 1993, the charity has a successful track record of working with both major companies and SMEs. Prior to founding the organisation he was Head of Fundraising at Friends of the Earth (1988-1993). He set up the charity with a certain level of frustration at the then strategies of the environmental NGOs: “They didn’t communicate or engage with business in any sense at all unless it was to confront and shame them… If you look at the environmental movement at the time […] it was very issues-based, and it wasn’t really people-based. So there were two reasons why I left. I thought, well, if you’re not going to engage people in this debate, you know, you’re not going to get anywhere […] and I wanted to work with business and be a lot more solutions driven.”

The longevity of KI-8’s engagement enabled useful insights into the historical development of environmental NGO strategy in relation to business, and the not-for-profit status of the organisation that he founded provided an interesting counter-point to commercial agencies.

KI-9.

Male, 39

KI-9 is the Creative Director and co-founder of one of the UK’s most influential sustainability communications agencies. After studying marine biology to MSc he enrolled in the then recently established “Masters in Leadership for Sustainable Development” course, run by Forum for the
Future, where he met his co-founder. From 1998 he worked for 18 months as an Environmental Manager at London Transport “to see how the levers of power worked in a big organisation” before setting up the agency, one of the first dedicated sustainability communications agencies in the UK, in 2001.

Given the influence of KI-9’s agency in the development of the sustainability communications in the UK, especially the ‘creative communications’ end of the field, he was an important informant.

KI-10.

Male, 40

KI-10 is the Head of Brand Communication for a major blue chip UK firm. He was previously a copywriter with an agency and a freelance business writer before joining the corporation’s global marketing and brand team. His role includes commissioning outside agencies, including those that produce the corporation’s CSR reports, and liaising between brand and marketing, and sustainability and CSR functions of the business, in matters of corporate communication. He has also been involved in sustainability communications initiatives and board level proposals within the business, as well as brand/CSR integration strategy.

KI-10 has a BA in Philosophy and an MA in Creative Writing.

He provided useful insight into the agency field from the client’s perspective, relations between business functions and between brand and sustainability in a global corporation.

KI-11.

Male, 31

K-11 is Head of Sustainability at a long established “corporate communications consultancy”. He has been with the business nearly four years, heading up a small dedicated sustainability team. The team was set up a couple of years before he joined the company, and works in collaboration with the other key service offerings: brand; corporate reporting; employee engagement; marketing communications; and digital and video. Following an English degree, he had worked for five years in

133 Forum for the Future describes itself as “...a non-profit organisation working globally with business and government to create a sustainable future”. Its Masters programme, accredited by Middlesex University, was founded in 1996, and now has around 200 alumni.
communications and CSR in the healthcare industry, becoming a CSR manager. He became involved in sustainability issues through volunteer campaigning with Friends of the Earth and won one of only five places from across Europe to join a six month programme for young people run by WWF and sponsored by Ben and Jerry’s—“Climate Change College”—in which he was trained on both climate science and campaigning.

The youngest of my key informants, K-11 is effectively of another generation in terms of his relation to the field; moving into CSR a couple of years out of college and into an already established field of sustainability communications. This perspective in itself was useful. He also provided valuable insight into an important agency.

KI-12.

Male, 43

KI-12 is CEO of a pioneering sustainability communications agency. He began his career in communications as editor of his university’s student newspaper and went on to spin off a design agency from the Student Union’s trading arm. After a brief dalliance with commercial publishing he got a job as a campaigner for an animal welfare charity, becoming Campaigns Director (and supplementing his low income with freelance journalism). His campaigns won prestigious Design & Art Direction awards, but also drew the ire of the Charity Commission for “political campaigning”. In 1998 he left for a new regional sustainability think-tank where he became “deeply involved in wider sustainability issues, scenarios planning, regional development” and “did the first regional climate change impact study”. Having become increasingly aware of the potential for professional communications practice to further the agenda of sustainable development, and an undeveloped market in third sector and public sector organisations, in 2002 he co-founded the agency with KI-13 and one other – the agency doubled in size annually for several years. The agency has become internationally recognised and in 2010 KI-12 helped launch a European wide network of sister agencies to compete for multi-national projects and exchange expertise.

KI-13.

Male, 39

KI-13 is Managing Director of the agency which he co-founded in 2002 with KI-12. Previously he worked as a camera operator and subsequently a producer at the BBC, before leaving to work for the same animal welfare charity as KI-12 in campaigns, moving on to head communications. He then
took a position as marketing manager with a region-wide third sector organisation, which he brought over to the agency as an early client.

**KI-14.**

Male, 44

KI-14 started his career as a ‘creative’ in a London advertising agency. He was a co-founder of a “socially aware” advertising agency that created some of the Body Shop’s seminal campaigns, underwent consultancy SustainAbility’s first “social and environmental audit” and operated as an “employee shareholder democracy”. Since leaving the agency in 1999 he has worked as a consultant on marketing and sustainability for both businesses and NGOs. An acknowledged expert in both “new marketing” and sustainability he is the author of several influential books, including one of Amazon’s annual Top Ten Business Books. Amongst other projects he runs a consultancy that seeks innovative ways to encourage pro-environmental behaviour change programmes in organisations. A lifelong vegetarian, he has the distinction of convincing Unilever to launch the Vegetable Oxo Cube.

**KI-15.**

Male, 45

KI-15 is a former board member of Saatchi & Saatchi who left the company after becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the ethics of the advertising industry. The “final straw” for him was a campaign to create demand for cosmetics amongst rural populations in African countries. In 2005 he left to set up a creative agency specialising in “ethical marketing”. In 2009 he co-founded another ethical marketing agency, of which he is Creative Director, which makes a virtue of being the only UK agency with a 50:50 ratio of women to men in its creative department (in a notoriously male dominated industry). He has authored a book on ethical marketing and writes regularly in the advertising trade press on ethical marketing. He is a former board director of the Direct Marketing Association, the UK’s largest marketing industry body.

**KI-16.**

Male, 45

KI-16 is a former head of Saatchi & Saatchi Government Worldwide, which consults on political campaigning. In 1994 he left to found an early branding agency which specialised in developing social engagement projects for corporations. An early proponent of CSR reporting, the agency
produced McDonalds first CSR report, following the ‘McLibel trial’ in the 1990s. Together with his co-founder he authored a book in 2002 on the need for business to embrace “social purpose”. The agency developed into a “full-service strategy consultancy” – while the mainstay of its business in the 2000s was CSR reporting for FTSE 100 companies, as in-house CSR teams have become commonplace its main market is now consulting to corporate marketing and brand teams. He sits on the board of several charities, is a trustee of the Big Society Network and in 2009 launched the Sustainable Restaurant Association, a not for profit membership organisation encouraging sustainability in the sector.
Appendix II: Online Forums and Discussion Groups

There has been a certain amount of churn in business sustainability related forums over the research period - for example, www.sustainabilityforum.com, which boasted an online community of over 3000 members as of February 2011 no longer exists. In the earlier part of the research period Yahoo! Groups, the Internet’s largest host of discussion groups, was the focal point. When researching the CSR field 2009-2010 the most active and oldest (founded 1999) online CSR group was ‘CSR Chicks’ (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/csr-chicks), with 7,800 members (not gender specific) followed by the rival ‘CSR Blokes’ (http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/csrblokes) with 2,400 members (probably somewhat more gender specific) in 2011.

The Yahoo! groups have gone into decline, with the CSR Chicks forum activity peaking in 2008 (CSR Chicks, 2012), probably due to the growth of the 2degrees Network (www.2degreesnetwork.com), which claimed over 11,000 members in 2011, and the growth of the professional social networking website LinkedIn (see below).

The 2degrees network, launched in 2008, claims to be the world’s largest online community of sustainability professionals. LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) has undergone massive growth in recent years, with 33.9 million users in June 2011, a 63% increase on the previous year (Womack, 2011). A core function of LinkedIn is to provide professional groups with forums for discussion, promotion and job recruitment. I observed and participated in a number of relevant LinkedIn groups in 2011 and 2012, such as Sustainability Professionals (47,407 members) and the Ethical Brand Network (266 members). As can be seen from these membership statistics groups are of hugely different sizes and levels of activity (although the two do not always correlate). By way of example, the Ethical Brand Network group describes itself in its summary profile thus:

“The Ethical Brand Network exists to encourage dialogue and thought leadership. The network aims to be a hub for forward business thinkers and managers who wish to develop practices that can lead to better business models and communications.”
(LinkedIn, 2012)

Most of the organisations (including companies, media organisations, and professional groups) relevant to the field now have a presence on LinkedIn, many in the form of LinkedIn Groups (for example, of those previously cited, inter alia: 2degrees, CSR International, Ethical Corporation,

---

134 As of 14/07/12
Guardian Sustainable Business). This, together with the integration between LinkedIn and other social media, such as Twitter, has made it a key aggregator of specialist professional news, information and discussion.
Appendix III: Some Key Events in the Development of Corporate Sustainability in the UK (1984-2001)

1984 Bhopal, India – Union Carbide gas leak kills at least 22,000, injures 100,000 (according to Amnesty International)

1986 Barclay pulls out of South Africa following student led Anti Apartheid boycott

1987 Brundtland Commission publishes *Our Common Future*, the foundational definition of sustainable development

1989 Exxon Valdez disaster – oil slick covers 2,250km of Alaskan coastline

1991 The Body Shop's ‘Trade Not Aid’ initiative – the Body Shop goes on to pioneer social audits in the mid ‘90s

1992 Rio ‘Earth Summit’ – UN Conference on Environment and Development, launches Agenda 21, the voluntary global action plan for sustainable development

1993 Forestry Stewardship Council established – the first ‘multi-stakeholder initiative’ of industry and environmental NGOS

1994 First Fairtrade Foundation certified product launched in UK

1994-1996 ‘McLibel’ trial – McDonald’s attempts to sue environmentalists over campaign leaflets

1995 Royal Dutch Shell scandals – Brent Spar controversy and execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and Ogoni activists in Nigeria

1995 World Business Council for Sustainable Development launched – CEO led global corporate grouping

1996-97 Nike ‘sweatshop scandal’ over conditions in its supply chain, ongoing since early ‘90s intensifies following publicity around Californian El Monte sweatshop

1998 Ethical Trading Initiative launched in the UK – multi-stakeholder group for auditing and reporting of labour standards in the supply chain.

1998 Nike CEO speech at National Press Club signals U-turn and launch of new social auditing policies
1999 Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Sustainability Reporting Guidelines launched, partnered with the UN Environment Programme

2000 UN Global Compact CSR initiative launched

2000 Carbon Disclosure Project launched in the UK to encourage corporate reporting of climate impacts and exposure to CO₂ related business risk on behalf of institutional investors

2001 FTSE4Good Index launched in the UK – ethical investment indices based on a range of CSR criteria
Appendix IV: Work Undertaken by the Agency in a Typical Week

Below are listed a representative sample of roughly half (56 of 98) of the ‘active jobs’ (i.e. ongoing work activity) in a typical week at the Agency (see Section 7.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client</th>
<th>Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company (commercial property)</td>
<td>Leaflet for staff promoting green travel options and new cycling-promotion scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company (low carbon technologies)</td>
<td>Business cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Commercial) Green Exhibition Event</td>
<td>Social media activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quote for animated graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum 1</td>
<td>Online annual review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Design for exhibition book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery</td>
<td>PR support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Event co-ordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum 2</td>
<td>Brand design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PR support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation project</td>
<td>Website amendments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Progress report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature reserve</td>
<td>2 x Advert Films</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Ads</td>
<td>Website updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PR activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Icons design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Event management support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Big Society briefing note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Tourism Marketing Agency</td>
<td>Digital map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Footage library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tourism review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council climate change campaign</td>
<td>Final website amendments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marketing collateral[135]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workshops with sustainable living charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council ‘place branding’</td>
<td>Website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic strategy (copy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

135 Refers to a collection of media used to support the sales of a product or service, such as: sales\promotional brochures; sales\promotional presentations; product\service support literature; web content etc.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing Association</th>
<th>CSR Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toolkit style sheeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brand guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-marketing research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Office graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awards research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Web development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental charity</td>
<td>Marketing plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Word template design work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive briefing design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Website development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exit report writing (copy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Interest Company (Conservation and outdoor activity)</td>
<td>Two press tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area Partnership</td>
<td>Social media campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposal for next phase of digital project</td>
<td>Marketing strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-third sector area partnership (social engagement programme and area branding)</td>
<td>Roll-out of programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-private green travel partnership</td>
<td>Green travel leaflet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-stakeholder Climate Change Partnership</td>
<td>Site-based promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate Week special newsletter</td>
<td>Press releases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography

3BL Media (2011) http://3blmedia.com/theCSRFeed, viewed 14/10/11


Accenture (2011a)
https://microsite.accenture.com/sustainability/research_and_insights/Pages/ungcreports.aspx , viewed 07/07/11

Accenture (2011b)
https://microsite.accenture.com/sustainability/business_solutions/Pages/sustainability_strategy.aspx, viewed 07/07/11

http://crsalarysurvey.com/home.php viewed 10/01/12


Alexander, J., Crompton, J., Shubsole, G. (2011) Think of Me as Evil: Opening the Ethical Debates in Advertising Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) and WWF-UK
www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/strategies_for_change/, viewed 07/10/12


247


ASDA (2012a) http://your.asda.com/aislespy/, viewed 02/07/2012

ASDA (2012b) *Green is Normal – ASDA’s Sustainability Study* http://your.asda.com/sustainability, viewed 02/07/2012


www.cim.co.uk/filestore/resources/canons/ethicssustain.pdf, viewed 25/09/12


www.unrisd.org, viewed 25/09/12


249

BITC (Business in the Community) (2008) "Procter & Gamble - Ariel Turn to 30" www.bitc.org.uk/resources/case_studies/pg_rm.html, viewed 14/08/12


250


CIM (Chartered Institute of Marketing) (2012) www.cim.co.uk, viewed 04/07/12


252

www.demos.co.uk/files/CarrotsSticksSermons.pdf, viewed 10/09/12


CorporateRegister (2009) www.corporateresister.com, viewed 14/12/09

CorporateRegister (2012) www.corporateresister.com/stats/, viewed 08/06/12


Crane, A. (2000c) “Corporate Greening as Amoralization” in Organization Studies, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp.673-696


CSR Chicks (2012) http://groups.yahoo.com/group/csr-chicks, viewed 14/07/12


254


Edwards, D. “The Mystery of the Missing Clocks” www.medialens.org, viewed 10/05/12


FEEL Communications (2012) http://feelagency.com/ourvalues/, viewed 09/06/12


256
Fishburn Hedges (2012) www.fishburn-hedges.co.uk, viewed 07/06/12


Forster Communications (2011a) http://www.forsteragency.co.uk/en/page_44.php, viewed 08/08/11

Forster Communications (2011b) www.forster.co.uk/work.1.3.html, viewed 08/08/11


257

Fraser, N. (1990) “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” in *Social Text*, No. 25/26, pp. 56-80


Futerra (2011) www.futerra.co.uk/about_us/walk_the_talk, viewed 12/07/11

Futerra (2012) www.futerra.co.uk/work#go=asda-sustainability-1874, viewed 15/07/12


Guardian, the (2011a) “Can business inspire consumer behaviour change?” www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/brands-inspire-consumer-behaviour-change?INTCMP=SRCH, viewed 10/05/12

Guardian, the (2011b) “Unilever and Walmart in Joint Water Saving Campaign” www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/turn-off-the-tap-suave-shampoo, viewed 05/10/11


Hill & Knowlton (2008) Reputation and the War on Talent: Corporate Reputation Watch 2008 www.hillandknowlton.co.uk, viewed 21/06/12


261


262

Ketchum (2012) www.ketchum.com/sustainability, viewed 02/03/2012


www.andosciasociology.net/resources/Foucault$2C+Governmentality$2C+and+Critique+IV-2.pdf, viewed 28/07/12


LinkedIn (2012) www.linkedin.com/groups/Ethical-Brand-Network-3539208?trk=myg_ugrp_ovr, viewed 14/07/12


Marketing Society (2012) www.marketingsoctyawards.com, viewed 07/06/12

Marks and Spencer (2012) “Recycle your M&S clothes at Oxfam” http://plana.marksandspencer.com/about/partnerships/oxfam, viewed 19/06/12


Mayday Network (2012) "The BT approach to employee engagement"
www.maydaynetwork.com/node/1432, viewed 18/08/12


McFall, L. (2002a) "Advertising, persuasion and the culture

McFall, L. (2002b) "What about the old cultural intermediaries? An historical review of advertising producers" in *Cultural Studies* Vol.16, No.4, pp. 532-552


hhttp://www.cric.ac.uk/cric/papers.htm, viewed 29/01/09

McSpotlight (2012) www.mcspotlight.org/media/press/msc diyjustice.html, viewed 01/08/12


Media Week (2008) “Aegis acquires Clownfish for £500,0000” www.mediaweek.co.uk/news/851180, viewed 07/06/12


267


268

Mortimer, R. (2008) “Sorrell calls for an end to deliberate obsolescence” www.marketingweek.co.uk/sorrell-calls-for-an-end-to-deliberate-obsolescence/2060175.article, viewed 04/07/12


NESTA (2008) Selling Sustainability - Seven lessons from advertising and marketing to sell low-carbon living www.nesta.org.uk/assets/documents/selling_sustainability_supplement viewed 10/10/12


Nice & Serious (2012) www.niceandserious.com, viewed 07/06/12

Nike (2011a) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VR8WwRkUsyU, viewed 07/02/12

Nike (2011b) http://nikemakers.tumblr.com, viewed 07/02/12


270
Preston, J. (2011) "Pepsi Bets on Local Grants, Not the Super Bowl" www.nytimes.com/2011/01/31/business/media/31pepsi.html?_r=0, viewed 05/05/12


Radley Yeldar (2012) www.ry.com, viewed 07/06/12


Redfern, P. (1920) The Consumers’ Place in Society Manchester: Co-operative Union Ltd.


271


SalterBaxter (2011) www.salterbaxter.com, viewed 08/08/11


Schatzki, T. (2011) “Where the Action Is (On Large Social Phenomena Such as Sociotechnical Regimes)” SPRG Working Paper 1, wwwsprg.ac.uk, viewed 01/12/12


272


273


www2.lse.ac.uk/sociology/pdf/TonkissCultStud07.pdf, viewed 01/07/12

Townsend, S. (2011) http://twitter.com/GreenSolitaire 14/12/11


276
UNEP/Futerra (2005) “Communicating Sustainability: How to produce effective public campaigns”
www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Guide_English.pdf, viewed 07/10/12

Uren, S. (2011) “Green marketing is dead – but brands could still save the day”
www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/blog/green-branding-marketing-consumer-behaviour?INTCMP=SRCH, viewed 04/07/11


WARC (World Advertising Research Centre) (2012) www.warc.com/Topics/Awards.topic, viewed 01/05/12


277
https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/34220/12_01_introduction.pdf?sequence=1, viewed 01/05/12


Watts, P. (1998) “The international petroleum industry; economic actor or social activist?” in J. Mitchell (ed.) Companies in a World of Conflict: NGOs, Sanctions and Corporate Responsibility London: Earthscan \ Royal Institute of International Affairs


Webb, T. (2012a) “The ethical consumer at scale myth: Why do we persist in believing we can buy our way out of trouble?” http://tobywebb.blogspot.com/2012/01/ethical-consumer-at-scale-myth-why-do.html, viewed 03/05/12

Webb, T. (2012b) “New WEF report shows that sustainable business groups will need to rethink their roles” http://tobywebb.blogspot.com/2012/01/new-wef-report-shows-that-sustainable.html, viewed 03/05/12

Webb, T. (2012c) “Campaign groups will need to evolve their approach” http://tobywebb.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/campaign-groups-will-need-to-evolve.html, viewed 11/06/12


