

IN PRACTICE

BP – Beyond Petroleum?

In 1998 BP installed solar power cells at 200 of its pumping stations, which looked like an example of commitment to green values. However, BP invested only 0.1% of its portfolio in solar panels while simultaneously expanding its fossil fuel extraction and exploration programme. In effect, one could argue that BP conducted a public relations campaign designed to accommodate its consumers' concerns about the effect of carbon emissions upon the world, while also expanding its fossil fuel extraction process. Critics refer to this as 'greenwashing', in an analogy with 'whitewashing'. BP has also adopted 'socially responsible' positions on global warming to mitigate regulatory risk and legitimize its operations. By defecting from the Global Climate Coalition, an association that denies global warming, it was able to take part in debates over policy prescriptions, voicing a preference for market-based and voluntary solutions.

Question

How ethical is BP? Use the web to research arguments 'for' and 'against' the position that BP is an ethical corporation, paying particular attention to the high-profile industrial accidents that it has been involved in, especially the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. See, for instance, articles like this one: www.nytimes.com/2017/12/15/business/energy-environment/bp-lightsource-solar.html, which represents a rich source for debate.

BP had to try and reset its sustainability image after the *Deepwater Horizon* catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico. The firm developed a communication campaign to restore its image. A discourse was created about the value of BP's future financial choices and showed how, after the catastrophe, it had reinterpreted its policies in detail to act ethically. Such a communications strategy, based on an ethics that declared future commitments, aimed to counterbalance the loss of legitimacy associated with the ecological catastrophe, the cost of which was constantly reassessed upwards (Matejek and Gössling, 2014). The *Deepwater Horizon* catastrophe, with ethical manifestations that conformed to extremely pressing communicational constraints (Chandler, 2014), makes for a particularly clear instance of ethical opportunism, in which there is a form of disconnection between a second-order ethical discourse linked to media communication with regard to past or devalued practices and a first-order discourse focusing on current organizational practice. As Patala, Korpivaara, Jalkala, Kuitunen and Soppe (2017) acknowledge clean rhetoric can be adopted to cover up dirty technologies (see also Gond and Nyberg, 2017).