

ENGLISHES

TESTI E CONTESTI DELLE LINGUE INGLESI

Direttore

Alessandro GEBBIA

“Sapienza” — Università di Roma

Comitato scientifico

Paolo FABBRI

Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali “Guido Carli” (LUISS) di Roma

Silvia BURINI

Università “Ca’ Foscari” di Venezia

Jean–Marie KLINKENBERG

Université de Liège

Isabella PEZZINI

“Sapienza” — Università di Roma

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Tra le lingue occidentali, l'inglese è quello che si è maggiormente evoluto, se non trasformato, fino a divenire la lingua della globalizzazione. Oggi, quindi, non si può più parlare di "English" bensì di "Englishes", ognuno dei quali si inserisce in un ben delineato contesto geografico e storico-politico dal quale ricava e afferma nuove e originali strutture grammaticali e lessicografiche. È il caso dell'anglo-americano, dell'anglo-canadese e dell'anglo-australiano, ormai realtà consolidate e codificate, così come è il caso dell'anglo-caraibico, dell'anglo-indiano e dell'anglo-africano (nelle sue diverse accezioni) che sono tuttora realtà "in progress" e, proprio in virtù di ciò, le più interessanti e innovative.

La Collana intende, pertanto, ospitare studi filologici e linguistici, testi grammaticali e lessicografici che possano coadiuvare l'insegnamento dell'inglese moderno e aiutare la comprensione e l'insegnamento delle letterature che di questi "Englishes" sono espressione.

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MICHELA GIORDANO

TRANSPARENCY IN CORPORATE WEBSITES AND SUSTAINABILITY REPORTS

**COMMUNICATION, CULTURES,
AND COMMITMENT IN THE ENERGY SECTOR**





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INTRODUCTION

COMMUNICATION, CULTURES, AND COMMITMENT

Dealing with transparency in corporate websites and sustainability reports of companies in the energy sector, the present investigation was carried out by a scholar of the University of Cagliari who is a member of an interuniversity project funded by the Italian government entitled *Communicating transparency: New trends in English-language corporate and institutional disclosure practices in intercultural settings* (PRIN2020TJTA55), which also includes the Universities of Calabria, Modena/Reggio Emilia, Roma Sapienza, and Verona. The group's general research concerns corporate communication practices in terms of transparency, credibility and trust, social responsibility and ethics, identity, and reputation construction.

In today's digital landscape, corporate websites and reports serve as the primary interface between companies and their stakeholders. Transparency has become a crucial element in establishing and maintaining corporate credibility and trust. "(T)he pressure of some groups of stakeholders (customers, clients, employees, and environment) improves the quality of transparency of the reports" (Fernandez-Feijoo, Romero, Ruiz 2014: 53). This study explores three key aspects of transparency in corporate websites and reports dealing with sustainable energy: communication, culture, and commitment.

(Clear) Communication

Clarity of communication in corporate websites and reports refers to the practice of presenting information in a straightforward and easily understandable way. This is essential for effective and successful interaction with various stakeholders, including customers, investors, and employees. Clear communication on corporate websites and reports involves several key elements:

1. **Plain Language:** Using simple, jargon-free language ensures that information is accessible to a wider audience. Technical terms, when necessary, should be clearly defined and a certain style of communication and user-oriented techniques should be used for web editing (Capriotti and Moreno 2007; Denti and Giordano 2010; Garner 2011; Giordano 2014).
2. **Logical structure and web architecture:** Information should be organized in a logical and intuitive way, allowing users to navigate the website easily and find the information they need. Clarity of communication and informativeness of websites will be one of the key topics in Chapter 1.
3. **Visual Aids and visual rhetoric:** Incorporating charts, graphs, infographics, tables, and images can help convey complex information more effectively than text alone (Murray 2014).

Culture: Adapting to Online Environments

The digital domain presents unique challenges and opportunities for corporate communication. Developing transparency in online environments requires consideration of several factors:

1. **Interactivity:** Providing opportunities for stakeholders to engage with the company through features and web elements such as comment sections, forums, or live chat can foster a sense of openness, frankness and accessibility.

2. Real-time updates: Regularly updating website content to reflect current events, company news, and industry developments demonstrates a commitment to keeping stakeholders informed.
3. Multichannel or multimodal presence: Maintaining consistency across various online platforms (e.g., social media, mobile apps) ensures a cohesive, direct, and transparent online presence.
4. Cultural sensitivity: For global or international companies, considering cultural differences in communication styles and expectations is crucial for effective transparency across diverse markets. The cultural aspect of communication styles of corporate websites will be better developed in Chapter 1 of this study.

Commitment: Establishing Corporate Credibility and Trust

Demonstrating an honest commitment to transparency is essential for building and maintaining corporate credibility and trust. This can be achieved through several strategies:

1. Disclosure of information: Providing comprehensive information about company operations, financial performance, sustainability reports, and governance practices demonstrates a commitment to openness and plainness.
2. Addressing challenges: Openly discussing challenges or setbacks facing the company, along with plans to address them, can build trust through honesty and integrity.
3. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): “Corporate social responsibility is a communication tool companies use to convey a transparent image” (Fernandez-Feijoo, Romero, Ruiz 2014: 53). Clearly communicating the company’s CSR initiatives and their impact on the environment and the surrounding community helps establish a positive corporate ethos. This will be better developed in Chapter 2. In the context of corporate websites establishing credibility involves demonstrating the organization’s expertise, reliability, and moral character. To enhance ethos, companies should: establish authority in the field, present authentic leadership profiles, emphasize their

experience and values, clearly communicate the company's mission, vision, and ethical standards.

4. Accessibility: Ensuring that important information is easily accessible and not hidden behind multiple clicks or in obscure sections of the website only findable by following several hyperlinks.

Transparency in corporate websites is a multifaceted concept that includes clarity in communication, adaptation to diverse cultures and communities, and a demonstrated commitment to openness. By focusing on these three key areas, communication, culture and commitment, companies can build trust with their stakeholders, enhance their reputation, and ultimately strengthen their position in the competitive digital marketplace. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, maintaining transparency will remain a significant challenge for corporations.

With the increasing sophistication of online users and the growing concern over corporate transparency in annual reports, companies face the challenge of building and maintaining trust, reliability, and authority through their web presence. This study explores the strategies for enhancing transparency and trust in corporate websites through some key elements: clarity of communication and informativeness, cultural diversity and commitment and ethos. Commitment reflects a company's dedication to its stakeholders, including customers, employees, and the community. To convey commitment through a corporate website, a company can highlight corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, for example ongoing efforts in sustainability, philanthropy, and community engagement. The company can also provide regular updates and maintain an active news section or blog to keep stakeholders informed about company developments. Some websites communicate the company's future plans and aspirations to demonstrate a commitment to growth and progress.

Establishing trust is paramount for sustainable energy websites and company reports. Credibility indicators such as third-party certifications, partnerships with reputable organizations, and clear attribution of information sources are essential. For instance, the German Energiewende website (<https://www.lots.de/>) prominently displays collaborations with research institutions, enhancing its perceived reliability.

Transparency is also achieved through the open sharing of methodologies, data sources, and limitations. The United States Energy Information Administration (EIA, Homepage – U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) website exemplifies this by providing detailed explanations of data collection processes and potential margins of error. Such practices allow for informed interpretation of the information presented.

Clear, jargon-free, non-specific language is crucial for effective communication with diverse audiences. The UK's Committee on Climate Change website (Climate Change Committee (theccc.org.uk) demonstrates this principle by offering layered content, from executive summaries to in-depth technical reports, trying to reach various levels of expertise.

Different countries may prioritize various aspects of sustainable energy based on their unique contexts. For example, American and Indian websites emphasize energy security or community interests alongside environmental concerns, reflecting national priorities.

Interactive and engaging visual representations, such as tables and graphs, of complex data enhance understanding. Many websites utilize interactive maps and charts to illustrate global renewable energy trends, making information more accessible to a broader audience.

Regular updates and progress tracking demonstrate ongoing commitment. Many platforms regularly publish case studies and news articles, keeping stakeholders informed about a country's green transition progress.

In conclusion, trust, transparency, and clarity are fundamental to the effectiveness of sustainable energy websites across different countries. By implementing these principles, environmental commitment platforms can better inform, engage, and inspire action towards a sustainable energy future.

Other papers written in the same framework include *Shades of transparency in the rhetorical appeals of energy sector disclosure practices* by Olga Denti and Michela Giordano (forthcoming). In today's business environment, companies are increasingly focusing on transparent communication practices to build trust with their stakeholders. This paper examines how international energy companies like Edison (Italy), BP (UK), Chevron (USA), and Saudi ARAMCO (Saudi Arabia) use sustainability reports to disclose information and engage with their audience.

Transparency in corporate communication involves sharing clear, honest information about a company's activities, especially regarding environmental, social, economic, and governance issues. This openness helps create stronger relationships between businesses and their stakeholders, including customers, investors, and the public at large.

Sustainability reports are key tools for companies to demonstrate their commitment to transparency. These reports go beyond financial data to cover areas such as environmental impact, social responsibility, and ethical practices. By providing this information, companies aim to show they are accountable and responsible corporate citizens.

Denti and Giordano research explores how these energy companies use language and rhetorical techniques in their sustainability reports to enhance transparency and build trust across different cultures. The paper adopted the distinction made by Piechocki in his study *Transparency of Annual Sustainability Reports* (2004). The author investigates three types of transparency indicators:

1. Linguistic Indicators: illustrate the clarity and accessibility of the report in terms of structure and style.
2. Thematic indicators that show what elements or themes form the content of the report.
3. Depth indicators, which provide insight on how the company is dealing with those themes or issues.

Some key elements examined in Denti and Giordano's paper (forthcoming) include indicators that the authors considered *metadiscursive indicators*, adding these to Piechocki's Linguistic ones:

1. Intertextuality: Referencing other texts or sources to support claims and increase credibility.
2. Reader-inclusive pronouns: Using words like "we" and "our" to create a sense of shared responsibility and engagement with the reader.
3. Self-mentions: How companies refer to themselves in the reports, which can influence how they are perceived.
4. Attitude markers: Words or phrases that express the company's stance on various issues.

5. Engagement markers: Language that directly addresses or involves the reader in the communication.

These linguistic features contribute to three main rhetorical appeals:

- Ethos: Establishing credibility and trustworthiness;
- Pathos: Appealing to emotions and values;
- Logos: Using logic and reason to persuade.

By analysing these elements, the research aims to understand how energy companies from different cultures approach transparency in their communication. The findings suggest that such stylistic choices play a significant role in making information more accessible and understandable to readers from various backgrounds, ultimately enhancing transparency and trust in corporate communication across cultures.

CHAPTER I

IN THE SPIRIT OF CARE AND EMPATHY CULTURAL PARAMETERS IN CORPORATE WEBSITE DESIGN

In today's globalized business environment, corporate websites serve as digital ambassadors representing companies worldwide. However, creating transparency and fostering trust through these platforms can be challenging when addressing diverse cultural audiences. This chapter explores how the theories of Edward T. Hall (1976, 2000) and Geert Hofstede (1980, 2001) can guide the development of culturally sensitive corporate websites that effectively build trust and transparency across different cultural contexts.

Edward T. Hall's (1976, 2000) concept of high-context and low-context cultures provides valuable insights into communication preferences and choices. High-context cultures, such as Japan, China or India, rely heavily on implicit communication and shared cultural understanding. In contrast, low-context cultures, like the United States and Germany, prefer explicit, plain, and direct communication. When designing corporate websites, companies must consider these cultural dimensions to effectively convey their message and build trust.

For instance, a website targeting a high-context culture might emphasize visual elements, subtle cues, and relationship-building content. Conversely, a website for a low-context culture should prioritize clear, concise information and straightforward navigation. By aligning website design and architecture with these cultural communication styles, companies can create a more familiar and trustworthy online presence for their target audience.

Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (1980, 2001) offers additional perspectives on how cultural differences impact business interactions.

Starting from the assumption that all cultures can be related to one another according to the style through which they communicate and transmit information (Hall 1976, 2000; Hofstede 1980, 2001), this first chapter analyses two websites of oil and gas refining and marketing companies, Chevron in the USA (<https://www.chevron.com/>) and Reliance Industries in India (<https://www.ril.com/>). Table 1.1 shows the main metadata of the two websites, presenting some of the results of the research conducted within the PRIN2020TJTA55–CAGLIARI UNIT.

Table 1.1.

Category	Attribute	Attribute	Attribute
Company	NAME	Chevron Co.	Reliance Industries
Mode	Text/visual/ audio-visual/links	Text, visuals, html, links	Text, visuals, html, links
Setting	corporate/ institutional/mixed	Multinational Corporation	Multinational corporation
Text genre(s)	sustainabil- ity report	Sustainability Reports 2017-2021, 2023	Sustainability reports 2004-2005/2017-2018, 2023
	annual report	Annual Report 1995- 2021 - Supplement to AR 1995-2022	Annual Reports 1976-2020
	financial report	Financial State- ments 2019-2021	Financial Report- ing 1999-2023
	Other	Responsibility Report 2002-2016 - Several others	
	web page	https://www.chevron.com/	https://www.ril.com/
Socials	Instagram/ Facebook/ Twitter/LinkedIn/ YouTube/ Messenger/	Instagram/Facebook/ Twitter/LinkedIn/ YouTube	Instagram/Facebook/ Twitter/LinkedIn/ YouTube

YouTube		https://www.youtube.com/user/chevron	https://www.youtube.com/user/flameoftruth2014
Market sector		Integrated oil & gas	Conglomerate
Product type		Petroleum Refineries / oil and gas production/ distribution/supply	Oil to Chemicals, Oil & Gas, Retail, Digital Services, Financial Services, and Others
National/ cultural background	reference to country of ownership		Yes
Country of ownership		USA	India
Founded		1879	1958
Headquarters		San Ramon (California)	Mumbai
Subsidiaries		Texaco, Tengizchevroil, Chevron Australia Pty. Ltd, more	Jio Platforms, Reliance Retail, Reliance Petroleum, Network18 Group, Alok Industries, Reliance Foundation, Indiawin Sports, Reliance Global Corporate Security

Considering that “[n]o comprehensive and exhaustive description can be formulated about a particular social group or collectivity” (Denti & Giordano 2011: 148), the present chapter endeavours to discover whether the “High and Low Context” communication framework devised by Hall can be considered relevant for these types of websites. The study examines how they are organised and designed in relation to certain particular cultural parameters. Three of these are scrutinised in detail: informativeness (to look at the quantity and quality of information, transparency and clarity), time–orientation (in order to explore synchronous and asynchronous communication, message speed, usability and type of technological tools) and power distance (with the aim of considering collectivism and individualism, status and hierarchy and

trust, linear versus circular website navigation), all of which influence stakeholders' intelligibility and usability of the websites.

As Zhao *et al.* (2003: 81) have shown, web-based communication is neither fully neutral nor culture specific, therefore the similarities or differences in the design of the websites will be interpreted in terms of local adaptation to the forces of international and globalised communication and to the need for transparent business frameworks and web architectures.

According to Hall (1976, 2000), 'High Context' (HC henceforth) refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behaviour are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think thanks to years of interaction with each other. Members can rely more on shared meanings and common knowledge and less on explicit formal written formulas. Thus, information is predominantly communicated implicitly, in indirect ways and the members of HC social groups are proficient at reading non-verbal cues and at interpreting paralinguistic features. Strong boundaries are established between in-group members and outsiders. The roles of authority and hierarchy are more clearly defined and respected, and differences in status are valued. Their concept of time is linked to the cycle of past, present and future.

Societies in HC cultures seem to be more interested in avoiding conflict and in fostering trust rather than in signing contracts: thus, they depend less on language formality and on the drafting of legal documents. HC cultural features characterise collectivist societies, which prioritise personal and face-to-face relationships, but also group welfare and harmony. Examples of HC cultures are India, France, Brazil, China, Japan, Mexico, and Russia.

On the contrary, Low Context (LC henceforth) refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration. In these societies, cultural behaviour and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so outsiders coming into the cultural environment will understand how to behave. Knowledge and information are abundant, codified, public, external, thus more accessible and transferrable. Members are rule-oriented and task-centred, activities focus around actions that need to be done and decisions that need to be made. Experience and