The WEF summit in January focused on sustainable development. How can you distinguish between real commitment to sustainability and greenwashing?

The traditional definition says that greenwashing is misleading and disinformation of an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image. At USI we have expanded the definition by adding that, next to the instrumental disinformation, greenwashing requires an accusation by a stakeholder. Just like the German saying: "Wo kein Kläger, da kein Richter" (no plaintiff, no judge).

In a recent article, my co-author Lucia Gatti and I call this the "accusation-based definition of greenwashing". The term certainly comes from the corporate world, but the issue concerns also governments, administrators and even individuals and consumers. Often we also see phenomena such as "cognitive dissonance" leading to misleading green messages. The intention however does not necessarily have to be manipulative. Sometimes it is just human sloppiness and 'the easy way out'.

Besides the negative connotation that comes with such a label, do you think that, with the current climate change hype, "green" marketing could actually lead to tangible actions?

Yes, an accusation of greenwashing can be seen as a stigma – although we have found that consumers tend to forget quickly. Regarding the challenges for the environment and biodiversity, green communication alone does not do the job. According to our findings, weak or ambiguous regulation invites to engage in greenwashing approaches, whereas clear and understandable rules prevent them. Tangible actions therefore will not come from a greenwashing accusation, but – ideally, at least – such accusation may lead in open discussion to a deliberate democracy for more sustainable regulation.

The company or retailer. In the SNF project, we changed perspective and analysed how a greenwashing accusation affects the business-to-business (B2B) relations on the supply chain. Therefore, we shifted the focus of analysis to the locus of greenwashing. We found that the locus has an impact both on moral categories such as "blame" as well as on economic categories such as the willingness to invest. Hence, we found a new form of greenwashing, called "vicarious greenwashing", when the behaviour of a supplier is in breach with a company’s claim of sustainability. I would also like to mention that the research project was successful insofar as it allowed for both the post-doctoral researchers working on the project to obtain professorships in Switzerland and France and now pursue their investigation on the subject of greenwashing at an international school.

In the realm of business claims that so far have had to do with form than with substance, corporate social responsibility now appears to have become an essential element for genuine business and economic growth...

Actually, in many cases we are still far from tangible results and still in the domain of lip service. This is bad for at least two reasons. First, if there is no credibility and trust in the claims, the opportunity is missed to actually improve something. Instead, trust erodes further and this is not helpful for a flourishing business environment. Secondly – and if I may say so tragically, a number of companies today find many inflections of the buzzword 'sustainable' – in agriculture, building, economy, and finance, to name just a few – and an abundance of related initiatives, but are they substantiated by tangible actions?
company, if the majority perception is that most do greenwashing instead of seriously walking the talk».

In a recent article published by the Neue Zürcher Zeitung you raised the question of sustainability becoming unethical. Could you elaborate on this?

«One of the most intriguing and puzzling paradoxes is the link between sustainability and freedom. In the long run, understanding free market societies based on unrelentless growth does not work. When the first cities and cantons in Switzerland officially announced ‘climate emergency’, I felt that it was as hypocritical as legally the state of emergency in political philosophy comes with emergency legislation, as known in the case of natural disasters by supreme power or crisis situations like revolutions. Fortunately, we do not have any of those now. However, officially announcing the state of emergency to symbolically communicate that officials and governments tend to take climate change seriously, I argue that by not speaking up, by accepting anything as is, we are accessory in a general culture of power games that undermine open discourse and competition of ideas as the foundation of a vivid and functional democracy and free market economy. As greenwashing has been around since the 1980s, it somehow paved the way for the current crisis of open democracies as we, the consumers, accepted the window dressing and green lies little by little, and thus have little by little weakened the power and functionality of democracy».

So what is the future of Greenwashing?

«The green and sustainability issues – as urgent as they are – have become rather mature. Regulators regulate more and more, companies communicate and advertise their products and services and consumers keep on buying, green and non-green. But what happened with the green movement that lead to greenwashing happens again today with the digital transformation, where we find topics like machine-washing or ethics washing, when digital platform companies present themselves as responsible or ethically informed. Recent academic research has found that artificial intelligence (AI) ethics boards are just a smokescreen preventing upcoming regulation. That is why it is called “ethics-washing”. Whether one likes it or not, misleading instrumental communication seems to be part of human nature. But then, so is being a watchdog and promoting credibility and unveiling any deceptive communications.»

Do you see a connection between greenwashing and fake news and democracy?

«Absolutely. The standard definition of greenwashing mentioned above builds on the concept of ‘disinformation’. Although it has only been a few years since debate we have been observing the issues of fake news and alternative facts in the public debate, I would argue that by not speaking up, by accepting anything as is, we are accessory in a general culture of power games that undermine open discourse and competition of ideas as the foundation of a vivid and functional democracy and free market economy. As greenwashing has been around since the 1980s, it somehow paved the way for the current crisis of open democracies as we, the consumers, accepted the window dressing and green lies little by little, and thus have little by little weakened the power and functionality of democracy».

中存在的悖论之一是可持续性和自由之间的联系。在长期内，理解以持续增长为基础的自由市场社会是行不通的。当第一个城市和州在瑞士正式宣布“气候紧急状态”时，我觉得这就像法律上的“紧急状态”一样具有讽刺性。幸运地是，我们没有这些。然而，正式宣布紧急状态以象征性地传达官员和政府正在认真对待气候变化，我认为通过不讲话，接受任何现状，我们成为了一般权力游戏中的配角。由于绿色洗白自1980年代以来一直存在，它在某种程度上为当前民主危机的出现铺平了道路，因为我们，消费者，接受了绿色谎言，逐日逐日地，最终削弱了民主的权力和功能。

因此，未来的绿色洗白是什么？

“绿色和可持续性问题 – 尽管是如此紧迫 – 已经变得更为成熟。监管机构的监管越来越多，企业建立沟通并宣传其产品和服务，而消费者继续购买，绿色和非绿色。但绿色运动导致绿色洗白所发生的事情也在今天再次发生，数字转型中，我们找到了诸如机器洗白或伦理洗白等话题，当数字平台公司在没有责任或伦理知情的情况下，以负责任或伦理信息的形式出现时。最近的学术研究发现，人工智能（AI）伦理委员会只是用来防止即将到来的监管的烟幕。这就是为什么被称为“伦理洗白”。无论是喜欢与否，误导性的工具性沟通似乎已经成为人类本性的一部分。但是，这样就是成为监督者，以及促进信誉并揭露任何虚假沟通。”

你是否看到了绿色洗白和假新闻与民主之间的联系？

“当然。绿色洗白的标准定义以上建立在“误导信息”这个概念上。虽然自发表以来，我们就一直在观察假新闻和替代事实在公众辩论中的问题，我会认为通过不说话，接受任何事情，我们成为了普遍权力游戏中的一部分。由于自1980年代以来，绿色洗白一直在存在，它在某种程度上为当前的民主危机铺平了道路，因为我们，消费者，接受了绿色谎言，逐日逐日地，最终削弱了民主的权力和功能。”

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