

CGA Accounting Research Centre and the AFI Section DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER SERIES

Professor Charles H. Cho
John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, Montreal

Dr. Charles Cho research interests are Social and Environmental Accounting; Corporate Social Responsibility; and Accounting and the Public Interest. Dr. Cho has published articles in refereed academic journals such as *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, *Advances in Environmental Accounting and Management*, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, the *European Accounting Review*, the *International Journal of Accounting Information Systems*, *Gestion - Revue Internationale de Gestion*, the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Social and Environmental Accountability Journal* and *Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal*, and was an invited author of a chapter in the book *Contemporary Issues in Business Ethics*. His work has been presented at various international conferences, and he recently obtained funding for sustainability-related research from the Social Sciences and Humanities and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Fonds Québécois de Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FQRSC).



Topic: «The Frontstage and Backstage of Sustainability reporting: Evidence from the Arctic National Wildlife refuge bill»

Abstract:

We attempt to respond to Hopwood's (2009) call for research to explore further the motivations to produce environmental and sustainability reports and disclosures through detailed case studies to understand in depth "the interaction of such concerns with the relevant regulatory authorities, the media and political circles." Our results suggest that the firms' sustainability discourse on environmental stewardship and responsibility sharply contrasts with their less visible but proactive political strategies targeted to facilitate the passage of the ANWR Bill. Our study thus contributes to the social and environmental accounting and accountability literature by uncovering and documenting further the deceptive nature of the discourse contained in stand-alone sustainability reports.

A concept called social and environmental accounting is gaining popularity. Not enough though, according to the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research would like to see the concept more "accepted" as a field in accounting. This organization would like to see more visibility for this approach. The term "sustainability" reports is used to describe the reports that are used to communicate the findings of social and environmental accounting. The reports may be issued as stand-alone or included with other reports such as the financial results. The choice is a voluntary one and of course there are arguments for and against the two approaches.

The motivation for the study that is being reported here is to explore the motives and implications of sustainability reporting particularly with respect to the items that are talked about in the report (frontstage) and issues that do not appear in the sustainability reports at all (backstage).

This study analyses the actions and reactions of the oil and gas companies to the passing and implementation by the United States of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Bill. The analysis is based on a mathematical model designed to test which items were frontstage and which were backstage.

An analysis of the results of the model tended to confirm what had been suspected by the researchers. There are sharp contrasts between what appears frontstage and that which is left backstage. This contrast suggests perhaps some management hypocrisy. Frontstage, as set out in sustainability reports, are the environmental actions of the organization. Sensitivity to the Arctic region was covered, particularly biodiversity protection. As to such items as political strategies, there was no coverage in reports. Items such as political donations, membership in certain organizations and lobbying were left to the backstage.

More research needs to be done in this area to uncover and document the nature of the material contained in stand-alone sustainability reports.