

Materiality and the Enduring Aspects of Organisational Identities

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Abstract

This article contributes to the emerging body of work in organisational theory that seeks to include materiality in conceptualising processes of organizing (e.g. Law, 1994; Doolin, 2003; Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2004; Dale, 2005). Using the four largest multinational oil companies' green transition towards renewable energies as a case the article integrates material aspects into the theory on the narration of organisational identities. Following Czarniawska (1997) the concept of organisational identity is viewed as an evolving organisational narrative. Following Law (1994) this organisational narrative is then conceptualised as a socio-technical narrative. The article describes how oil related technologies and their accompanying symbolic meaning and technical oil related standards can be conceptualised as part of the enduring aspects in oil companies' organisational identities. The article concludes to that end that both social and material aspects add to the endurance of organisational identities.

Key words. Identity narration; materiality; greening of oil companies; climate change.

Introduction

There seems to be an emerging consensus that organisational theory is incomplete as long as materiality ‘remains in its blind spot (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1998:363).’ Thus, this article contributes to the growing body of work in organisational theory that includes materiality in conceptualising processes of organizing (e.g. Law, 1994; Doolin, 2003; Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2004; Dale, 2005).

The effort of getting materiality out of organisational theory’s blind spot requires that the dichotomy between the material and the social must be dissolved (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1998). Dale (2005) is to this end offering the metaphor of the river and the riverbank, where the river is the social and the riverbank is the material. While, at first glance the riverbank – the material – might seem the fixed part and the river – the social – the dynamic part, it appears by have a closer look at the metaphor that both the social and the material can be viewed as both dynamic and fixed. That the social encompasses both dynamic and fixed parts is what the contemporary concept of organizing (Weick, 1979) and the discussion on the dissolved dichotomy between actors and social structure is all about (Giddens, 1984). Likewise, in dissolving the dichotomy between the social and the material the message is that materiality is not to be viewed just as a fixed structure, but also to be viewed as part of a dynamic process. Thus, returning to the metaphor offered by Dale (2005) some parts of the riverbanks are too hard (fixed material structure) and there the river (the social) must adapt its flow to the banks. On the other hand some parts of the riverbank are eroded away by the river resulting in small material elements joining the flow. Thus, there seems to be no easy distinction now between river and riverbank. ‘The river-and-banks can be seen as the mutual exchange of molecules, of fixity and motion, of solid and liquid, mutually shaping and reshaping (Dale, 2005:655).’

This article will seek to dissolve the dichotomy between the social and the material in developing the concept of organisational identity. This concept was in 1985 originally defined by Albert and Whetten (1985) as that which is central, distinctive and enduring about the organisation. In this conceptualisation materiality was not addressed and the enduring aspects were therefore described as related only to issues of social structure. Since 1985 the field of organisational identity (see e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Czarniawska, 1997; Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 2002; Gioia et al, 2000; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) has challenged not least the enduring aspects in Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition. This development has brought the concept of organisational identity in line with the dynamic concept of organizing (Weick, 1979). While the field of organisational identity theory to this end has managed to dissolve the dichotomy between the actor (organisational identities) and external social structures, the field has so far not made much effort to also dissolve the dichotomy between the social and the material. In fact, it is only very recently that materiality is at all being taken into consideration in conceptualisations of organisational identity construction (see e.g. Czarniawska, 2000; Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2004). Thus, this article draws on a case study methodology in constructing new theory on the material aspects in processes of organisational identity narration. The case that is used is the four largest multinational oil companies' current green transition towards renewable energies. The overall research question that will be addressed is: *What role are the oil companies' existing oil related technologies playing in the renewable energy narration of oil companies' organisational identities and what implications does this development have for the conceptual understanding of the enduring aspects in organisational identities.*

In addressing the overall research question the article merges Czarniawska's (1997) narrative theory with more recent work on materiality in organizing processes (Latour, 1991; Law, 1994; Czarniawska, 1998, 2000, 2004; Doolin, 2003; Dale, 2005;). Based on this the article

conceptualises organisational identities as evolving socio-technical narratives. The article describes how oil related technologies (Latour, 1991) and their accompanying symbolic meaning and technical oil related standards (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1998) can be conceptualised as part of the enduring aspects in oil companies' organisational identities. The article concludes to that end that both social and material aspects add to the endurance of organisational identities.

Organisational Identities

Albert and Whetten's (1985) concept of organisational identity viewed as that which is central, distinctive and enduring about an organisation belongs to the traditional body of organisational theory that conceptualises organisations as stable social phenomenaⁱ. In further developing this concept of organisational identity the contemporary field of organisational identity theory (see e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Czarniawska, 1997; Schultz and Hatch, 1997, 2002; Gioia et al, 2000; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) has emphasised that organisational identities are not to be viewed as stable social phenomena, but to be viewed as social processes (Schultz and Hatch, 2002) embedded in external social environments that are themselves to be viewed also as social processes.

Czarniawska appears to be one of the most active in developing the field further by also integrating material aspects in conceptualisations of organisational identity construction (Czarniawska, 2000; Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2004). In this effort Czarniawska (2000) has noted that other 'organisational theorist do not engage in this discussion (materiality), although they should (p.276)'. Recently, however, it seems that material aspects are beginning to gain more attention within the field of organisational identity. Thus, for example, Ravasi and Schultz (2006) in their newest article draw attention to the potential important role of companies' products in these companies' organisational identities.

Czarniawska (1997) is in her early narrative theory focusing primarily on dissolving the dichotomy between the actor (organisational identity) and external social structure. She does that by viewing organisational identities as organisational narratives continually narrated and produced in conversations, where both internal and external stakeholders exchange their preferred narratives in negotiating the evolving organisational narrative. The construction of organisational identities happens in 'a two way process (Czarniawska, 1997: 44)'. That is, both society (external social structure) and the organisation (actor) take part in the narration. To this end organisational identities are 'produced, reproduced, and maintained in conversations, past and present (p. 45)'. In other words, she recognises that organisational identities are 'historical because past conversations are evoked in the course of present ones (Czarniawska, 1997:45)'. At the same time she also views organisational identities as relational and produced anew all the time, including by those external stakeholders, who take part in the narration.

Czarniawska (1997) in her narrative theory is drawing attention to the importance of material aspects. She explains Latour's (1991) position - that technologies are what makes society enduring - and notes then that 'for him (Latour) technology is the fixing and connecting device, and in the present context it would be the reproduction technologies that permit the locating of present conversations in history, that is, in past conversations (1997:13)'. Thus, in Czarniawska's (1997) narrative theory materiality in the form of reproductive technologies are included in her theorizing of the enduring aspects of organisational identities. In this article I will seek to expand the focus and include also other technologies in conceptualising the enduring aspects in the narration of organisational identities.

Method

As a first step towards determining the overall research question a semi-structured qualitative interview (Kvale, 1997) was carried out with the Director for the Danish Wind Industry Association. The theme for the interview was the growing synergy between oil and renewable energy technologies. The Director also provided the analysis with an additional source of qualitative data on the growing synergy between oil and renewable energy technologies. These data comes from a video recording of a Copenhagen Off-Shore Wind Conference held 26-28 October 2005 in Denmark. This conference concerned future prospects for off shore wind farm business. The video contains a number of speeches by managers from the wind turbine industry as well as from Shell. The interview and the video recording of the conference have both been transcribed. These data are drawn upon in the analysis and have in important ways paved the way for formulating as a first step an overall research question that could facilitate an analysis of what role oil related technologies are playing in the oil companies' renewable energy narration of their organisational identities.

Since organisational identities are relational it is according to Czarniawska (1997) relevant to analyse more than one organisation. I draw to this end, in addition to the above data, on qualitative data coming from both BP, Shell, Chevron and ExxonMobil's advertisements in *The Economist* from ultimo 2002 until present time. These companies are the four largest multinational oil companies in the world. The advertisements contain 'autobiographical (Czarniawska, 1997:53)' data that reveal how the organisations in question seek to narrate their organisational identity. The oil majors' own narration is not the end of the narration, because as explained by Czarniawska (1997) 'in the process of narration...both the narrator and the audience are involved in formulating, editing, applauding, and refusing various elements of the ever-produced narrative (p. 49).' The weekly magazine *The Economist* is to this end chosen as a source of data, because it is a well known business magazine with a large world wide circulation and a large global business audience.

This audience is likely to include for example readers coming from financial institutions, governments, large international NGOs and a broad range of managers and staff in the energy and oil industry. Thus, by advertising in The Economist oil companies are in other words actively seeking to narrate their organisational identities in a magazine that is read by their key internal and external stakeholders – key stakeholders that might reject or accept this green narration.

In addition to The Economist I also draw on qualitative autobiographical data from the four oil companies' homepages. I focus here on the information they make available (in 2006) about their renewable energy activities. The data from the homepages are different from the data in The Economist in the sense that the narration on the homepages is less constrained in terms of the length. Also, the audience for the oil companies narration on their homepage is broader than the audience for The Economist and must be assumed to encompass also lower level employees in the oil companies, and external stakeholders that cannot afford or are not interested in buying The Economist on a weekly basis such as, for example, students, smaller environmental NGOs etc. Thus, on their homepage the oil majors are narrating themselves in front of a broader audience of internal and external stakeholders that might be in a position to reject or accept this green narration.

Summing up, drawing on The Economist, the homepages, the interview and the video recordings provide the analysis with a rich set of complementary data on the narration of the oil companies' transition towards renewable energy business. All these sources of data are at the same time also providing rich verbal and visual descriptions over time of the material aspects in the four oil majors' narration.

The Role of Oil Related Technologies in the Renewable Energy Narration of Oil Companies

The renewable energy narration of the four oil majors has so far been more or less forced upon them by external audiences such as not least governments. These governments have adopted the Climate

Convention in Rio in 1992 and thereafter agreed on specific CO2 reduction targets for industrialised countries in the Kyoto protocol in 1997 (UNFCCC). Such legislation translates into reduced use of fossil fuels in industrialised countries paving the way in many countries for climate friendly renewable energies. Furthermore, the increasing depletion of oil reserves in industrialised countries, the accompanying rising oil prices as well as emerging political determination in industrialised countries to become independent of OPEC oil (see e.g. President Bush's 2006 speech to the nation) are additional factors that have recently added considerably to external audiences' renewable energy narration of the oil majors. The external narration of oil majors have been earlier and more intense in relation to the European oil companies than in relation to the American oil companies, because Europe as opposed to USA is part of the Kyoto protocol (UNFCCC). Thus, European BP is, as will be further described below, a renewable energy 'first mover' among the oil majors with European Shell following BP's renewable energy moves quite quickly. The American oil companies have as opposed to BP and Shell until recently rejected an external renewable energy narration of their organisational identities (Levy and Kolk, 2001, 2002).

(Figure 1)

Oil companies are characterised by large scale technologies, such as oil platforms, that have a very long material life time and require huge initial investments. As a result oil technologies have a profitability that depends on unknown politics and market conditions *years ahead*. This technological factor in the oil industry is obviously an issue of important ongoing business concern for multinational oil companies under pressure from external audiences to narrate themselves, not as oil, but as renewable energy companies. Nevertheless, as will be illustrated below, all the four oil majors have anyway at this point in time become increasingly active themselves in the renewable

energy narration of their organisational identity. Figure 1 shows the number of advertisements in The Economist from the different oil majors during the last five years as well as the theme for the narration in these advertisements. The period from 2005-2006, where oil prices are steadily rising towards very high levels and the need for independence of OPEC oil becomes a growing political issue in western countries, are the years where all oil majors get active in their renewable energy narration.

Shell's Renewable Energy Narration

Like BP, Shell endorsed the Kyoto protocol already in the late 1990ties and established at the same time their renewables division Shell International Renewables. Thus, Shell has, like BP, narrated their transition towards renewable energy for quite some time by now (Shell homepage and BP homepage). The pictures in Shell's advertisements anyway indicate that large scale oil platforms and other oil related technologies play a key role in Shell's new renewable energy narration. In the period 2002 to 2004 Shell advertised 9 times. 6 of those advertisements contain very dominant pictures of large oil platforms and other oil related technologies. The texts are renewable energy related and say for example. 'Long before we decide to stop using fossil fuels, cost will already have made the decision for us. Not just monetary cost, but the human cost, the cultural cost, the environmental cost. We will, quite rightly, demand that our future energy is both sustainable and renewable (The Economist, 27 September – 3 October, 2003 and 4-10 October, 2003)'. Thus, the plot (Czarniawska, 1997) in Shell's renewable energy narration in The Economist in 2002-2004 is not consistent. Shell has recognised that the current energy situation is not sustainable. Shell is the hero who wants to save the world and make it greener. However, the pictures indicate that oil technologies play an inconsistent material role in Shell's new renewable energy narration.

The above inconsistency in Shell's renewable energy narration is not present in 2005-2006, where Shell advertises 11 times. Every time the picture in the advertisements is a large close up picture of the face of either a Shell employee or an external stakeholder in the form of an ordinary person from the society. The texts in these stakeholder advertisements goes, for example, as follows: 'Can the North Sea continue providing energy indefinitely? (Picture of a Dutch girl who is a wind surfer) Yes according to this Dutch windsurfer.' Below this there is a more detailed explanation in smaller letters about a Dutch off shore wind turbine farm and how Shell is 'pioneering a new generation of off shore wind farms (The Economist, 17-23 September, 2005 and 29 October – 4 November, 2005)'. The plot (Czarniawska, 1997) in Shell's renewable energy narration in The Economist in 2005-2006 is the same as in 2003-2004. However, material oil technologies play no apparent role anymore. Instead stakeholders (material bodies) and material off shore wind turbines seems to play an increasingly important role in Shell's renewable energy narration.

Shell's homepage in 2006 confirms that 'wind is currently one of the most promising sources of renewable energy'. When Shell established Shell International Renewables in 1997 they were involved in most renewable energies at a certain level, but on Shell's homepage it is by now stated that 'In Shell we aim to develop at least one alternative energy...into a substantial business.' And, in fact, as also indicated in their North Sea advertisement it looks as if Shell has selected wind energy as a primary renewable energy in developing their renewable energy business. Interestingly, installing large off shore wind energy parks seems like a very similar task as installing large off shore oil technologies. Thus, oil technologies appear still to be playing a key role in Shell's renewable energy narration. This is also illustrated in the way Shell these years narrates these off shore wind technologies. This narration of off shore wind energy technologies was what Shell

WindEnergy's speech at the Copenhagen Off-shore wind conference, 26-28 October 2005, was all about.

ShellWind's General Manager for Global Operations started his speech by saying that he had worked for many years in Shell oil and gas and that he just recently had come to work for Shell WindEnergy. In his speech he focused on only one issue: Technical standards within the field of off shore wind energy. The title of his speech was 'Exploring synergies between wind and off shore oil and gas'. The key plot in his narration (Czarniawska, 1997) was that the knowledge the oil industry has gained in developing their off shore oil and gas business can benefit the new off shore wind energy technologies. To this end a general message going through the entire narration was the need for making wind energy industry technical standards. He stressed that existing oil and gas related standards can be used with some elaboration as standards for the off shore wind energy industry. The quality in off shore wind energy technologies and business activities can be ensured, he argued, by drawing on these oil and gas industry technical standards. ShellWind's General Manager for Global Operations ended his speech by saying that Shell increasingly seeks ways how off shore wind energy parks and oil platforms can be materially integrated by for example using oil platform's electrical installations to transport wind power to shore etc.

When interviewing the Director for the Danish Wind Industry Association, who was the key organiser of the off shore conference, he talked about the standards that the oil companies impose these years on the wind turbine industry and their technologies. He said: 'All the experiences the old oil and gas engineers in oil companies have gained in the North Sea we can definitely learn a lot from. And it is such knowledge that the oil companies bring into the wind energy business and that knowledge can increase the quality and the solidity of our products. What happens technologically these years is a major technological jump, because the old engineers from the energy companies they are those that install and run the wind turbine parks and that means that

these engineers demand that the standards that conventional energy sources are living up to should also be the standards the wind energy parks live up to. That is a major challenge for the wind energy industry – and it is not always easy, because the standards are very high - but this is what will make it possible for the wind industry to take the next step – and make wind energy parks that functions as reliably and as well as conventional energy technologies.’

Summing up, following from the above analysis it shall be argued here that Shell’s old oil technologies can be viewed as the product of Shell’s past oil narrations and once produced, these old technologies and their related technical standards take part in new narrations, including of Shell’s new off shore wind technologies. In other words, in this article narration is more than ‘text and language (Doolin, 2003; 764).’ Narrations are ‘embodied and performed in various technologies and materially heterogeneous relations (Doolin, 2003; 764).’ Stakeholders are part of the narration (Czarniawska, 1997). Reflecting to this end on the audiences’ reaction to Shell’s off shore wind narration it shall be argued here that this narration is likely to be accepted by most stakeholders. The oil staff in Shell - that might fear for their job if Shell’s renewable energy narration accelerates - is likely to accept it, because they are the ones that know how to install and operate large scale off shore technologies. The wind turbine industry have no knowledge in that area. They know only how to produce the turbines. Financial institutions interested in Shell’s overall economic stability and emerging synergy between their oil and wind business is also likely to accept this narration, as are stakeholders concerned about global warming and/or global energy supply.

BP’s Renewable Energy Narration

BP was the first of the oil majors to endorse the Kyoto protocol publicly and BP has also so far moved faster on renewable energies than Shell and the other oil majors (BP homepage). The

pictures in BP's advertisements focus to this end on BP's new renewable energy logo. As the renewable energy 'first mover' in the oil industry BP has changed their logo from British Petroleum to Beyond Petroleum in July 2000. The logo is a 'vibrant green-white-and-yellow sunburst named after Helios, the ancient Greek sun god (Beder, 2002).' The texts in BP's advertisements goes as follows 'It is time to think outside the barrel (The Economist, 23-29 July, 2005)', or 'It is time to turn up the heat on global warming (The Economist, 10-16 September, 2005)', or 'It is time to go on a low carbon diet (The Economist, 16-22 July, 2005)'. In several of BP's advertisements they make clear that BP in 1997 became a first mover, because they were 'the first major energy company to acknowledge the need to take precautionary steps against climate change (The Economist, 23-29 July, 2005).' Thus, the plot (Czarniawska, 1997) in BP's narration in The Economist appears to be that BP has been the first among the oil companies to recognise that the current energy situation is not sustainable. BP is an ancient sun god – a provider of solar energy - and a much greater hero than late comers such as their key European competitor Shell. BP was the first, who wanted to save the world and make it greener. The material oil technologies play no role in BP's renewable energy narration. Instead BP's material sun logo plays a key role. However, in reflecting upon BP's narration from the perspective of the potential audiences involved in the narration it should be noted that when the Beyond Petroleum logo was launched this new logo internally in BP 'lead to confusion and dissatisfaction, because it threatened to hamper the company's core activities and business units' daily operations (Banerjee and Kapner, 2001). At the 2001 annual meeting, management retracted the original message by emphasising that it was not meant to show the company's intention to retreat from oil (Levy and Kolk, 2001:507).' Thus, internal stakeholders might be among those that reject BP's above narration.

As opposed to off shore wind energy, solar energy is not at all appearing as similar to oil technologies. They are first of all on shore technologies, typically placed on buildings and they

are usually not that big, although when costs comes down they might be expanding in size covering for example entire roofs on big buildings. In BP's narration on their homepage there seem also not to be any indications that BP aims at using existing technical oil standards or existing oil technologies in the service of their solar energy business. Thus, in a sense the first mover BP has pursued a revolutionary and not an evolutionary renewable energy narration of their organisational identity. However, while BP is expanding considerable their solar business (BP homepage) they are also just as involved in drilling for oil as the other three oil majors. As reported by Levy and Kolk (2002) an Exxon interviewee in their study noted that: "The real question is whether Shell and BP will forego any economic opportunity in oil because of climate change. We don't think so. They have renewables divisions, but in their core oil and gas operations there is not much difference" (p. 292).'

Summing up, while material oil related technologies might not play as important a role in BP as they do in Shell some part of BP's staff is still not seeing themselves as beyond petroleum. Thus, while many stakeholders might accept BP's narration, BP will still have a problem with those BP members that are not beyond petroleum. Also financial institutions might object at some point in the future, if BP's economic performance starts to get harmed by BP not obtaining synergies between their oil and renewable energy business.

Chevron's Renewable Energy Narration

Chevron's advertising in 2003 – 2004 indicates that American Chevron, like American ExxonMobil, has not at this point in time started their renewable energy narration (see figure 1). In the period 2003 to 2004 Chevron advertised 6 times. 4 of those advertisements contain very dominant pictures of large oil platforms and other related oil technologies. The texts are not green, but are about deep sea drilling for oil. The texts go, for example, as follows: 'Working with our

partners, we're developing vast energy resources that once were locked far away from global markets. Together we're exploring deeper and building pipelines farther than others thought possible (The Economist, 31 January – 6 February, 2004).' The plot (Czarniawska, 1997) in Chevron's oil narration appears to be that Chevron in the period 2003-2004 has recognised that the current energy situation is not sustainable, because of the depletion of commercial oil reserves in non OPEC countries. Chevron is the oil hero who wants to save the world by going deep sea drilling for more oil in non OPEC countries. The supporters are Chevron's business partners, since deep sea drilling is expensive and risky and they cannot go there alone. The material oil technologies are playing a consistent and important role in this oil narration. However, later on a change happens with Chevron's narration.

In 2005-2006 Chevron advertises 13 times. In 8 out of these 13 advertisements the picture is a letter from Chevron addressed to their external stakeholders. The text in the letter goes as follows: 'Energy will be one of the defining issues of this century. One thing is clear: the era of easy oil is over. What we will do next determine how well we meet the energy needs of the entire world in this century and beyond...We can wait until a crisis forces us to do something. Or we can commit to working together, and start by asking the tough questions: How do we meet the energy needs of the developing world and those of industrialized countries? What role will renewables and alternative energies play?...We call upon scientist and educators, politicians and policy-makers, environmentalists, leaders of industry and each one of you to be part of reshaping the next era of energy (The Economist 16-22 July, 2005).' Oil technologies have a long material life time. Thus, energy decisions for the 'next 50 years' must be made now, as indicated by Chevron. In Chevron's last advertisements in 2006 they start to show pictures of biofuels, geothermal and other renewable energies. The texts go, for example, as follows: 'Geothermal power could serve all the electricity needs of almost 10% of the planet (The Economist, 29 July – 4 August, 2006).' In the same number

of The Economist there are 5 Chevron advertisements. One of them is not green, but is about oil sands another expensive oil reserve that has in the past not been exploited, because it was not commercial. Thus, the plot (Czarniawska, 1997) changes in 2005-2006. The problem is still the increasing depletion of commercial oil reserves outside OPEC. However, in 2006 Chevron emerges as the energy hero who wants to save the world and make more energy available through also developing renewable energies. New material renewable energy technologies have thus been added to Chevron's narration. Furthermore, also stakeholders (material bodies), who are now the supporters, have been added to Chevron's narration.

Chevron's homepage is revealing that oil technologies play a similar role in Chevron's emerging renewable energy narration as it is the case in Shell's renewable energy narration. The homepage explains to that end that the primary renewable energy Chevron is involved in is geothermal energy. Chevron says: 'we now produce 1152 MW of renewable energy, primarily geothermal, making us the largest renewable energy producer of any global oil and gas company. It also makes us the largest producer of geothermal energy...Geothermal is a renewable source of energy that uses the heat energy of the earth to generate power...The geological conditions conducive to generating power from geothermal energy exist in certain parts of the world...If conditions are favourable, an underground reservoir is created. This reservoir can be tapped in the same way reservoirs of crude oil and natural gas are tapped: by drilling a well. As the steam rises to the surface, its pressures decreases and it expands. This steam drives turbines, which in turn drives generators, producing electricity. The steam returns to liquid state in the condensers, and the residual heat is released in large cooling towers...remaining hot water is reinjected into the reservoir. Thus, the cycle of energy is renewed (Chevron's homepage, 2006). As it appears, geothermal energy is not possible to exploit without the use of oil technologies, since drilling for hot water is quite a similar activity as drilling for oil, as described above by Chevron.

Summing up, Chevron's homepage indicates that oil related technologies, like in the case of Shell, play an important role in Chevron's emerging renewable energy narration. However, Chevron has through choosing to focus on geothermal energy chosen a renewable energy that is *very* similar to oil related technologies. In other words, this new materiality hardly needs to be narrated to get to look like Chevron's oil business. Following from that it shall be argued that Chevron's new renewable energy narration is likely to be accepted by most stakeholders, including oil staff in Chevron, who already know how to operate geothermal technologies. Environmental NGO and Governments concerned about global warming and/or global energy supply, as well as financial institutions concerned about corporate economy and synergies between Chevron's oil and renewable energy business are also likely to accept Chevron's new narration.

ExxonMobil's Renewable Energy Narration

That ExxonMobil starts a climate change related narration of their organisational identity is a major shift in their narration. ExxonMobil is the largest oil company in the world and has been the most aggressive American oil company in fighting the Climate convention and its Kyoto protocol. However, as indicated in President Bush's speech to the nation in 2006 the US government is beginning to turn around on the issue of renewable energies. As announced by Bush the US will seek to get independent of OPEC oil, which can be translated into an increased emphasis on for example renewable energies. The smaller Chevron has reacted more and faster (Hoffman, 2001) to this recent change in institutional context in the US, but also powerful ExxonMobil is as indicated in their advertisements in *The Economist* in 2005-2006 now turning around on renewable energies.

In ExxonMobil's advertisements there is a picture of a material human brain followed by a text that goes as follows: 'More energy *and* lower emissions? Only one kind of power can deliver them both (*The Economist*, 4-10 June, 2005).' In the smaller text below it is explained that

ExxonMobil for decades has ‘consistently led the energy industry in research and technology. And now we are making the largest ever investment in independent climate and energy research that is specifically designed to look for new breakthrough technologies (The Economist, 4-10 June, 2005)’. In other advertisements without pictures this research programme is further discussed by ExxonMobil. These advertisements explain ExxonMobil’s thinking on energy and environment. How they will seek to meet growing energy demands and also seek to reduce emissions of this growing demand. The text ends: ‘The world faces enormous energy challenges. There are no easy answers. It will take straightforward, honest dialogue about the hard truths that confront us all. Wishful thinking must not cloud real thinking. New energy initiatives, however appealing they may sound, must also be practical, viable and economic – worldwide. However tough the issues, our answers must reflect the real world. Energy is simply too important to treat in another way (The Economist, 7-13 may, 2005 and 25 June – 1 July, 2005)’. Thus, the plot (Czarniawska, 1997) in ExxonMobil’s narration appears to be that ExxonMobil by now, as the three other oil majors, has recognised that the current energy situation is not sustainable. The problems are lack of commercial oil reserves in non OPEC countries as well as the environment. ExxonMobil is the real hero – the brain in the oil industry. Once they decide to save the world something will happen. Since ExxonMobil views themselves as the brain in the industry they appear not to need stakeholders as supporters. ExxonMobil in the form of a material human brain play the leading role in the narration. Oil technologies play no visual role in ExxonMobil’s renewable energy narration, but in the description of renewable energy technologies as so far dominated by ‘wishful thinking’ that ‘cloud real thinking’ on answers that must ‘reflect the real world’ there is an underlying comparison between ‘new energy initiatives’ which ‘however appealing they may sound, must also be practical, viable and economic – worldwide’ and then oil related technologies that have for decades lived up to ExxonMobil’s requirements as concern what is to be considered a serious energy technology.

Thus, the ExxonMobil narrator appears not to be able to accept any renewable energy narration of their organisational identity, unless these new green energy technologies are narrated to get them to look like oil related technologies. Only then will the ExxonMobil narrator be able to accept this new materiality.

If one looks at ExxonMobil's narration on their homepage it turns out that ExxonMobil is not just thinking, but has actually already moved into renewable energies in one specific area: biofuels. They explain on the homepage 'ExxonMobil today blends almost a million gallons of ethanol into our gasoline products every day in the United States, which will increase to 1.5 million gallons per day by the end of 2006. ExxonMobil has made significant investments to enable ethanol use. We expect to increase our use of ethanol to meet the new federal Renewable Fuels Standards that require suppliers to blend gasoline with 4 billions gallons of renewable fuel this year (2% of US supply by energy content), increasing to 7.5 billion gallons by 2012 (ExxonMobil's homepage, July, 2006)'. Like in Shell's off shore wind energy narration and Chevron's geothermal energy narration, it appears that oil related technologies play an important role in ExxonMobil's biofuels narration. Ethanol can namely be added to existing gasoline. Sold by the same gasoline stations to the same cars (an ordinary car can run on up to 10% ethanol in the gasoline, without any need for changes in the engine).

Summing up, not least gasoline stations play an important role in ExxonMobil's new biofuels narration. However, while ExxonMobil's biofuels narration might be accepted by most stakeholders it might very well be that in the longer run ExxonMobil's new biofuels narration is not sufficiently synergistic with their oil business to sustain ExxonMobil's leading position among the oil majors. Shell and Chevron might over time be able to create larger synergies, not least because oil platforms can play a role in their renewable energy business. ExxonMobil is probably quite

aware of this and time will show how the large research programme they have started will effect their future renewable energy narration.

Materiality and the Enduring Aspects of Organisational Identities

Following from the above analysis oil technologies are in this article viewed as old materiality that is playing an important role in the oil majors' renewable energy narration. Oil technologies appear not just to be cultural artefacts in the oil companies. These technologies belong, it shall be argued here, to the oil majors' organisational identities. Thus, using the words of Latour (1991) to reformulate Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition, one could as a first step argue that oil technologies are oil companies' central and distinctive organisational identities made durable. However, in this reformulation it should be emphasised that the above analysis showed that oil technologies and oil related technical standards are not easily separated in analysing the role these technologies play in the oil major's renewable energy narration. And, in fact, the material and the social are not easily separated in any technology, since as Czarniawska and Joerges (1998) argue technical standards are the 'institutional structure of machinery (p. 376)'. Thus, I will in this article add Czarniawska and Joerges' (1998) thinking on the social aspects in technologies to the above reformulation of Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition. To this end it should be argued that oil technologies and their related social aspects are oil companies' central and distinctive organisational identities made durable. This reformulation captures that technical standards are not the only social aspect in oil related technologies. The symbolic meaning of oil related technologies is another example of a social aspect not easily separated from these technologies. This is so, since as Czarniawska and Joerges (1998) argue 'symbolization requires materialization (p. 369)'.

Law (1994), and with him Doolin (2003), conceptualises narratives as 'monist'. That means that narratives 'do not assume a dualist division between 'ideas' and 'materials' (Law, 1994:

259)'. In this article I shall based on the above analysis suggest that Law (1994) and Doolin's (2003) conceptualisation of narratives could pave the way for arguing that organisational identities – viewed as ever-evolving organisational narratives (Czarniawska, 1997) – could be more accurately described as ever-evolving organisational socio-technical narratives. That is, organisational identities encompass both social and material aspects. The process – organisational identity narration – has also a socio-technical character. And, in fact, there seems to be no difference between the product (organisational identity) and the process (organisational identity narration). As Law (1994) stresses, 'narratives recursively perform themselves (p. 259).' As an example of the recursive character of the oil majors' organisational identities the above analysis revealed that old oil technologies can be viewed as the product of the oil majors' past oil narrations and once produced, these old technologies and their related technical standards and symbolic meanings take part in new narrations, including of the oil majors' new renewable energy technologies. This example emphasises once more that organisational identities do not just recursively perform themselves through text and language, but also, as illustrated in the above analysis, through 'various technologies and materially heterogeneous relations (Doolin, 2003: 764).' Drawing then finally on Dale's (2005) metaphor it shall be argued in this article that both process (narration of organisational identities) and product (organisational identities) can be metaphorically described as the *self-focused* part of an organisation's river-and-bank-in-the-makings *process*.

Since organisational identities encompass material elements it follows from this that audiences' reaction (Czarniawska, 1997) to these material elements are part of the narration of organisational identities. Before finalising this article I will therefore look into the symbolic meaning of oil related technologies and the different audiences' response on this symbolic meaning. I draw to this end on Czarniawska (2000) as well as Czarniawska and Gustavsson's (2004). These

authors discuss the web women Olga and Annova that are two material cartoon-like homepage internet figures representing the organisations behind them. The questions that Czarniawska and Gustavsson look into is who are those web women? How do they look, what do they do, what are they symbolizing for whom and what identities are they projecting of the organisations they represent. The same questions could be relevant to ask in relation to oil related technologies. This is so, because like Annova and Olga represent the organisations that have designed them, so are oil related technologies representing oil companies.

The answers to the above questions as regard oil technologies can be found by looking into the thinking behind the traditional anthropocentric business perspective. This perspective views man as over nature and emphasises that business is made through man's ability to conquer hostile nature (Thomas, 1999). Oil technologies are huge technologies precisely designed to conquer hostile nature. Thus, oil technologies symbolise oil majors' ability to conquer hostile nature. Furthermore, through their ability to conquer nature the oil majors are key in ensuring a certain level of material quality of life for people in our fossil fuels based industrialised societies. However, as illustrated by Czarniawska and Gustavsson (2004) different internal and external audiences perceive Annova and Olga differently. In case of oil technologies this seems also increasingly to be so. Thus, some parts of the oil companies' external stakeholders appear to perceive oil technologies as big dirty technologies that harm nature. In the well-known Brent Spar media campaign, where Shell was forced not to off shore dispose their old Brent Spar oil storage platform, Greenpeace deliberately appeared to use pictures of the big dirty Brent spar platform to project Shell's identity as a dirty rich company that use the sea as a waste dump (Rose, 1998). Thus, some audiences perceive the symbolic meaning of oil technologies in very positive ways and some perceive the symbolic meaning in very negative ways. This symbolic divergence in oil related technologies obviously is a problem in the oil majors' renewable energy narration, since oil related technologies

are involved in this narration and this narration will therefore all the time face the risk of being simultaneously both strongly accepted and strongly rejected.

Symbolic divergence is present also as concern renewable energy technologies, which is just adding to the oil majors' difficulties in their renewable energy narration. Renewable energies are contrary to oil technologies typically small land based technologies that are not designed to conquer, but to protect nature. Thus, renewable energy technologies belong to the ecocentric business perspective (Thomas, 1999) that views nature as over man. Business must in this perspective be sustainable – that is, protect nature, not conquer it. And this is what renewable energy technologies symbolise – man protecting nature, not conquering it. Thus, while some external environmental stakeholders perceive the symbolic meaning of renewable energies in very positive ways it seems that renewable energies in the oil majors' perspective are a somewhat wrong kind of Annova. Large anthropocentric technologies are the kind of Annova that oil companies wants to be represented by. Thus, what happens above in the oil majors' narration of renewable energies is in a way a narration of their new anthropocentric green Annova, where the symbolic divergence in oil related as well as renewable energies are addressed for the new Annova to be acceptable to both narrators as well as internal and external audiences. This is achieved, as it was described above, by selecting those renewable energies that are the most compatible with the symbolic meaning of the large anthropocentric oil Annova. Furthermore, the oil Annova's institutional structure of technical standards is then imposed onto the new Annova in the narration. The resulting new Annova is a large-scale green Annova who conquers nature in a sustainable way.

BP's new Annova is an exception to the above picture. BP has chosen a purely ecocentric Annova, by changing their logo and not narrating the land based small-scale solar energy technologies to get them to look like oil technologies. The first mover BP is therefore a dark horse in the oil majors' renewable energy narration, because the question emerges whether oil related

technologies are to be eroded away in BP's self-focused river-and-bank-in-the-makings process. If this happens then BP will have taken yet another first move that will have a substantial effect on Shell's and the other oil majors' ever-evolving organisational socio-technical narratives.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the emerging body of work in organisational theory that seeks to include materiality in conceptualising processes of organizing (e.g. Law, 1994; Doolin, 2003; Czarniawska and Gustavsson, 2004; Dale, 2005). Using the four largest multinational oil companies' green transition towards renewable energies as a case the article integrates material aspects into the theory on the narration of organisational identities. Following Czarniawska (1997) the concept of organisational identity is viewed as an ever-evolving organisational narrative. Following Law (1994) this organisational narrative is then conceptualised as a socio-technical narrative. The article describes how oil related technologies and their accompanying symbolic meaning and technical oil related standards can be conceptualised as part of the enduring aspects in oil companies' organisational identities. Thus, in this article it shall be argued to that end that both social and material aspects add to the endurance of organisational identities.

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Figure 1.

Oil companies' advertisements in The Economist	Shell	BP	Chevron	ExxonMobil
2002	4(green) 2(other CSR)	0	0	0
2003	2(green)	0	1(oil)	0
2004	1(green)	0	3(oil) 2(other CSR)	0
2005	5(green)	8(very green)	5(green)	5(green)
Until mid 2006	6(green)	3(very green)	7(green) 1 (oil)	0

CSR = Corporate Social Responsibility

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Notes

ⁱ Albert and Whetten's 1985 article is, in fact, a quite ambiguous article, where they were perhaps more in line with the concept of organizing than typically argued by the field of organisational identity.