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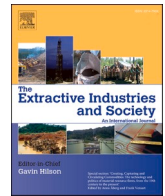
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Original article

Crafting counter frames: Shell's corporate strategies in the Nigeria campaign, 1995–1998

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ABSTRACT

In this article we analyse the actions of Royal Dutch/Shell (since 2021, Shell) considering the campaign against them and their operations in Nigeria in the mid-1990s. Using the concept counter-frames we analyse Shell's internal documentation of the campaign to understand how a multinational extractive industry engaged in disputes of legitimacy and against critiques of their operations. Focusing on frame disputes in the campaign the article contributes with an understanding of the practical development of counter-frames. Using historical records in the form of internal situational reports circulated among subsidiaries during the campaign period we show how different strategies such as lobbying, individual contacts, embedded journalists, production of information products and the development of social programs all were developed through a historical and contingent process between subsidiaries, the public and social movement organisations. Rather than solely identifying strategies used by oil companies the paper expose and analyse the internal logics of Shell which add important insights on the development of corporate strategies in light of environmental and human right campaigns, legislations and standards.

1. Introduction

Multinational extractive industries are crucial players in contemporary society and their operations impact both environments and social relations. During the last years, knowledge on how multinational oil companies have intentionally portrayed themselves in one way publicly while simultaneously disputing such frames internally have surfaced (Maloney & Khanna, 2022; Supran & Oreskes, 2021). In line with this recent research the purpose of this paper is to contribute to an understanding how such discrepancies are created. We will fulfil this purpose by analysing the relation between internal discussion and external frames as a process developing in relation to events and Social Movement Organisations (SMO) regarding Shell's involvement in Nigeria after 1995 until 1998.

The campaign against Shell in Nigeria was sparked by multiple factors. Shell had since 1937 had operations in Nigeria and remains the dominant oil company in the country (Ogbuigwe, 2018). In 1993 the company was forced out of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta by local opposition and thereby cutting revenues from both Shell and its partner the Nigerian government. Retaliation followed and the Ogoni activist group

MOSOP was specifically targeted. MOSOP and Ken Saro Wiva raised their concern with international human rights and environmental organisations (Obi, 2000). The conflict escalated and became more militarized. In 1995 nine activists including Ken Saro Wiva were executed which sparked a worldwide campaign against Shells environmentally destructive operations and their involvement in the conflict. Chief among the groups organising the protests were Amnesty and Greenpeace focusing on both human rights violations regarding the Ogoni and environmental destruction in the Niger Delta region (Hennchen, 2015). The influence of the campaign against Shell was also motivated by a previous campaign against the company's operations in South Africa and thereby the legitimization of the apartheid regime during the 1980s. Further, in 1994 Shell had been given permission to sink one of its North Sea platforms, Brent Spar, east of the Scotland coast. Greenpeace organized a campaign opposing the project which resulted in Shell terminating its plan in June 1995 (Sluyterman, 2007). As such Shell was a well-known target for human rights and environmental protest and in the fall of 1995, momentum was high among SMOs.

Through a unique material in the form of internal situational reports (sitreps) from multiple subsidiaries around the world —though

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dominated by subsidiaries in the Global North – we trace the relational unfolding of how Shell crafted counter-frames intended to neutralize the threat from the campaign. The paper thus asks: How, in practical terms were counter-frames constructed among subsidiaries? Which issues, actions and actors were deemed worthy of countering? Which effect did this have on the frames promoted publicly by Shell? Adding to the growing literature on movement-corporate engagement this study provides insights on the historical, multileveled, and encompassing strategies were developed and refined by corporate actors when faced with contentious claims. While counter-frames have been shown to respond to claims by SMOs and that these framing efforts show variations geographically and organizationally there is reason to question simplified cause and effect explanations as well as the strict demarcation of specific frames to certain actors or societal levels.

As environmental and climate movements have grown since the 1990s, (Cassegård et al., 2017) their claims against companies are growing too and the way movements target corporations include protests, boycotts, blockades, and litigation. Studies of such processes are rarely investigated historically and seldom focus on more than one national context. In this paper we address these two omissions in the literature and track how Shell engaged in a transnational and multilevel counter-framing process following the campaign against their involvement in Nigeria after 1995. As campaigns directly targeting multinational corporations have become more frequent since the 1990s, researchers have begun to take an interest in how these interactions unfold (Mac Sheoin, 2014; Soule, 2009; Yaziji & Doh, 2009). Some have conceptualised this type of anti-corporate activism as private politics, as the state or official governments are not the primary target (Baron, 2003; Lenox & Easley, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2015; Reid & Toffel, 2009). Minefee & Bucheli (2021) argue in a recent paper that this research is often focused on national/local activism against multinational corporations and view these as coherent entities, speaking with one voice (Joutsenvirta, 2011; Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015; Kraemer et al., 2013; Spar & La Mure, 2003). Furthermore, this research on corporate responses to campaigns has primarily focused on external communication or scattered sources. We argue that this has resulted in a static image of corporate response. Shifting from the perspective held by those spearheading social movements and typically found with the media toward that of the company, we argue that these frames need to be investigated in more detail with attention to the ways frames are invented or adjusted through multiple signals in the form of SMO claims and actions, political and economic structures as well as more mundane activities. Here we focus on the internal and practical aspects of campaign responses and thus offer new perspectives on the intersection of resource extraction and environmental history (Peša & Ross, 2021). Our paper builds on a host of studies published in *The Extractive Industries and Society* that examine the ongoing crisis in the Niger Delta (e.g. Isumonah 2015; Demirel-Pegg & Pegg, 2015; Iwilade, 2017; Adunbi, 2020), focusing specifically on Shell's corporate strategies in peripheral subsidiaries.

2. Corporate strategies in previous research

Corporate strategies considering SMO campaigns have been conceptualized in a number of ways. During the 1990 and early 2000s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) aimed to understand the ways in which corporations took on a responsibility for extra-operational issues. CSR was a way to understand what actors such as multinational corporations did, but the perspective also contained a normative judgement portraying businesses such as Shell as becoming more responsible and successful in implementing stakeholder engagement (see: Boele et al., 2001a, 2001b; Idemudia, 2010, 2018; Ite, 2004, 2007). Key in this research is also the issue of compliance. Within this research the reputation of the company is seen both as a factor influencing which companies are being targeted, but also in what level they comply. These extra institutional factors are more important given that in contrast to

state actors, social movement seldom have elite allies in companies (King, 2008). In this paper, rather than seeing social engagement as benevolent extra-political practices transforming companies, we analyse Shell as a political entity which is particularly important given that fossil fuel extraction in general, and in the Nigerian case specifically is an industry dependent on state cooperation (Obi, 2010).

Apart from CSR several concepts have been used to understand corporate engagement with social and political controversies. For studies of local communities, social licence to operate has been used (Lesser et al., 2021). Neutralization techniques have also been a way to understand public disputes, (McKie, 2019; Schoutz & Flyghed, 2020) and in research on environmental PR the concept of technologies of legitimacy is yet another way to understand similar dynamics (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2022).

Importantly, this paper introduces a more encompassing strategy beyond seeking legitimacy among local populations and beyond the discursive practices and arguments used. We argue that the idea of counter-framing offers a way to address the combination of practical and discursive strategies as they develop over time. By including internal documentations and processes the paper also develops the existing literature on counter-frames by arguing that counter framing depends on more than disputes regarding public opinion.

As captured by Minefee and Bucheli (2021), the rhetorical response by MNCs, and specifically Shell, to the campaign against Shell in apartheid South Africa is discussed as a form of multi-layered action where HQ and subsidiaries engage in different strategies depending on their position, both in terms of organisational hierarchy and in proximity to the core issue being contested. Through our access to internal documents, we are able to expand upon their insightful and fruitful contribution and extend the analysis from *identifying and categorizing rhetoric to tracing practice* as events unfold over time. Further, this paper covers a different campaign which also contains elements like environmental issues which were not present in the South African campaign. Rather than seeing the different levels and areas as separate entities with different strategies applied to them, we understand the sitreps as a technology to adapt and disseminate tactics from different levels aiding in the creation of counter-frames. The focus on practice and actions is also an important contribution to previous research focused public relations regarding environmental and human rights contestations (Hutchins & Lester, 2006; Lester & Hutchins, 2009).

Environmental issues have also recently caught the attention of researchers in business history (Bergoff & Rome, 2017; Bergquist, 2019). Here, we contribute with an understanding of how strategies and frames protecting continued extraction operations are produced. This ambition is linked to the growing literature on how fossil fuel corporations like Shell have targeted efforts to limit their operations by obstructing environmental protection policies (Brulle, 2020; Carroll, 2021; Dunlap & Brulle, 2020).

Discussions on corporate behaviour considering campaigns have also been studied from a social movement perspective. Social movement research has mainly been occupied with conflicts between civil society and the state, including police and military often omitting the role of companies (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). The field that has most thoroughly engaged with such conflicts have been those studying “private politics” (Baron, 2003). An important exception regarding the lack of research on environmental conflicts and private/corporate interactions consists of studies on environmental conflicts and social movements in the global south (Scheidel et al., 2020). Movements in areas such as Latin America and Africa have often targeted MNC subsidiaries directly (Martinez-Alier, 2016). More rarely have these local, albeit transnationally related, conflicts resulted in international campaigns (Estes, 2019). The Nigeria case represents an exception in this regard.

3. Frames and counter-frames: practical and discursive strategies in campaigns

In this paper we employ the concept of frames. In private politics where the corporation is the main opponent for SMO the use of frames to spark action and force the corporation to address and meet the demands have been the focus (Trumpy, 2008, p.484). In other words, the process by which a specific actor is made into a target of protest. Here, we instead look at the ways Shell engaged in counter-framing (Benford, 1987, p.75) or ways to produce frame disputes that aimed to both protect Shells operations, (Livesey, 2001; Holzer, 2007; Snow et al., 2018, p.403) demoralise SMOs and to force movement actors to respond and thereby draining energy on peripheral issues to the original claims (Benford & Snow, 2000, p.617). Frames are therefore primarily understood as the visible and communicated outcome or discourse of a contentious situation but can develop over the duration of a campaign. In the paper it is precisely this development rather than outcome which we analyse. Snow (2013 p.1) has argued that frames “perform a transformative function by reconstituting the way in which some objects of attention are seen and understood.” Counter-framing in this regard is what Shell engages in to force the movement and regulators to abandon or develop claims or become defensive (Benford & Snow, 2000 p.617). Importantly, we consider responses to SMO activities or frames present in press, among politicians or the public not simply in the fixed result of a specific argument or narrative structure but rather the result of input and reconsideration from multiple levels. Frames and counter-frames are constantly reconfigured and evaluated during the duration of a campaign. In this dynamic the accused (Shell) also has the potential of responding with silence, and while not a frame per se we consider silence as a part in this dynamic relationship. Messer et al. (2012) has argued that research on organizational framing has focused on government agencies which mirror the focus on state actors in social movement studies, but such official frames can also be seen among other powerful actors such as corporations (Messer et al. (2012) pp.475–78). As such the frame disputes and counter-frames from corporate entities could in the case of Shell also be considered as a form of repression, a political ambition limiting the legitimacy of protests and critique. The concept of frames and counter-frames enables us to trace how Shell aimed to uphold its position and legitimacy. Importantly, this is a process wherein strategies are deployed to create and enforce such frames and it is this process we analyse.

4. Material and methods

Shell is a multinational corporation structured as mother company/HQ and subsidiaries. Apart from these, Shell is visible and a potential target for movements in the form of gas and service stations. In this paper we focus on Shell's actions mainly through the internal correspondence gathered in situational reports between the different subsidiaries and HQ. Among these, North European subsidiaries are most frequent with other subsidiaries present more occasionally (specifically USA, Australia and Nigeria) Beginning almost daily during the winter of 1995 and continued a weekly basis (shortened W/E) from June 1996 until early 1998, the subsidiaries forwarded information on events related to the Nigeria issue in each respective country. Through the documents we are thus able to trace the development of different counter-frames as responses to claims made by SMOs. Our analysis has therefore focused on instances where we have been able to trace or follow developments over time, sometimes with the aid of additional archival material from the Swedish subsidiary. Relevant passages from sitreps have been excerpted and analysed focusing on the practical development of counter-frames. The analysis has been conducted using inductive methods and close readings of the material. We have abstained from using a more rigid coding scheme to allow for the historical analysis focusing on the event as a contingent process. The character of the documents entails a tendency to describe sudden changes and

information that need swift action and responses. In total the archive of AB Svenska Shell contains 143 such documents in folder F4B4. By analysing these in total we have not found any references in the material to missing sitreps and we are therefore confident that the material is a complete collection of the sitreps circulated during the period. In the analysis we present representative examples of the strategies used through references to specific sitreps. Documents will be referenced using the date of circulation/header of the fax. Apart from sitreps some documents from the Swedish subsidiary will be used to exemplify, these are collected in volume F4B2.

5. Organising counter-frames: the situation room

To understand Shell's counter-framing activities and the power with which Shell could respond to the claims made by the campaign against the corporation, we need to understand how the issue was addressed internally in a more organisational manner. It is important to note that Shell has historically pioneered the use of scenarios and proactive measures within the corporate sphere, such as by using specific scenario planning (Andersson, 2020). Their response to hostile claims could thus be characterised as proactive compared to other fossil fuel companies like EXXON who have been more prone to aggressively rejecting or countering allegations and regulatory efforts. By its very existence, the archive of the situational reports tells a story of such proactive performances. As the campaign against Shell gained momentum during the period from Shell's withdrawal from Ogoniland in 1993 up until the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995, the corporation had time to coordinate. Experiences from the Brent Spar campaign and the mixed messages from different operating companies (OpCos) in the summer of 1995 had shown “the need for greater internal communication and coordination” (Sleuwyterman, 2007). Since companies which have a record of being targets of SMO campaigns are likely to be targeted again, this statement speaks to the knowledge of such tendencies were present in the company (King, 2008, p.395). So, while the decentralised organisational structure of Shell enabled disagreements and different performances, (Minefee & Bucheli, 2021) this ability seems to be dependent on historical factors and previous claims. The developments in Nigeria were consolidated as an issue by the formation of the situational reports in late 1995. The situational reports constituted a way to circulate information on press and events that might be of interest for Shell in general as well as for the different subsidiaries. These news items, in turn, had been collected, transcribed (broadcast media) and translated at the local level before circulation.¹ When it became apparent that some of the social movements, most notably more militant groups, organised themselves online, Shell UK responded quickly stating that “A consultancy will soon begin to trawl the Internet for Nigeria info for SUK.”² Judging from the archive of the Swedish subsidiary, each operating company collected and reported events and press from their area, which was then compiled and distributed by the person in charge of the entire Nigeria issue.

The organisational structure offered Shell a high level of granularity in their ability to track events of importance. Information in the sitreps ranges from evidence of social movement activities originating from local employees to the United States suggesting sanctions against Nigeria and diplomatic discussions with the EU regarding this issue. Setting up a situation room where information was circulated represents the first and perhaps most important technology to craft counter-frames developed by Shell in response to the campaign. Gaining insights into how the issue was framed in different contexts, how key social movement actors travelled and engaged in local protests as well as a more general analysis of the relevance of the issue enabled Shell to take control. The sitreps also made it possible to quickly address

¹ Volume F4B5, AB Svenska Shell, Centre for Business History (CBH), Stockholm.

² Sitrep 25/03/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

delegitimising framings. Furthermore, the wide circulation of information enabled Shell to identify and re-use frames and openings in both critical and neutral coverage around the globe. They could anticipate actions and bad press. One example is how Shell early on identified that the film *Delta Force* attracted attention. Subsequently, they heightened their readiness if the film was expected to be shown in a particular location. Further, key organizations and companies like Greenpeace, Amnesty, Friends of the Earth and Body shop were identified as adversaries and when Greenpeace engaged in an action that backfired, this campaign could be used to delegitimise Greenpeace in all countries.³

In short, the first step for Shell to counter the campaign was to build up an information base to enable countermeasures and make these effective, which could ensure coherent communication among the OpCos. It also made Shell adaptive and able to use “[r]epeated revision of strategies and tactics”, as stated in a document listing key success factors.⁴

In the following sections we explore how the adaptive and strategical technology of the sitrep was used in order to create the counter-frames dominant during the campaign.

5.1. Responding to boycott: courting customers and convincing the opposition

Boycotts are crucial tools of SOMs and according to King (2008) have a higher success rate if media attention is high. Such were the conditions after the Brent Star campaign. In mid-November 1995, social movement actors and NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace called for a general boycott of Shell’s products.⁵ In Sweden this call to action was coordinated by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (Svenska Naturskyddsföreningen, SSNC) and primarily focused on human rights abuses but also environmental destruction. Already before SSNC released its call for sanctions, Shell had studied the possibility of legally restricting public employees and government officials from expressing support for a boycott.⁶ The document concluded that the only way to proceed with legal measures was to get the issue raised in the Swedish Committee on the Constitution as an issue of impartiality. Thus, Shell studied the possibility to legally silence protest and political support for the campaign.

The call for boycott by SSNC was circulated via the press, which led to Shell demanding a meeting, which subsequently took place on 31 January 1996.⁷ Before the meeting, Shell had been briefed by a journalist that SSNC was hesitant to proceed with its call for a boycott.⁸ It is easy to view Shell’s actions as purely reactive, but as a document outlining the goals of the meeting foretells, Shell also looked upon these meetings as sources of information that would help them identify actors and networks within these movements.⁹ Countering the call for boycott depended on two things, first that SSNC was ill informed of the circumstances in Nigeria and second by portraying the movements as non-legitimate claimants. For the first, Shell actively used what could be described as front groups, urging Swedish SSNC to contact the Niger Delta Environmental Survey, a group “launched by SPDC in 1995 and is now an independent limited company funded by the Nigerian oil

industry.”¹⁰

Statements on SMOs non-legitimacy are found in a PR strategy devised by the Swedish subsidiary of Burson Marsteller (BM) in February 1996. In the document BM argues that the call for boycott, though still not showing any signs of success, could hurt Shell, especially since “Now procurement processes are ongoing in many companies, municipalities and regions which is why these big customers of course are sensitive to demands and arguments from SSNC”.¹¹ Reaching out to these with a contrasting view became imperative. Since SSNC did not change its position even after the meeting in January and the discussions with Shell HQ, their claims were delegitimised as “sweeping and vulgar”.¹² Evidently, Shell became more confrontational when their information efforts failed to change the course of SSNC. BM suggested a two-pronged strategy that primarily involved securing contracts and upholding good working relations with other business partners, where the second strategy was to sway public opinion, distancing Swedish Shell from the events in Nigeria to ensure that no consumer boycott took place. This second strategy was also prevalent in the case of South Africa a few years earlier (Minefee & Bucheli, 2021). As stated above, however, changing the public perception of Shell was not the immediate primary strategy, which rather involved maintaining existing contracts and business partners through providing them with ample material portraying Shell’s picture of the state in Nigeria.

During the spring of 1996, a public debate between SSNC and Shell Sweden followed. Prior to entering the stage, SSNC conveyed “...that the boycott of Svenska Shell will cease. It had fulfilled its purpose (sic) and they were now entering a new phase.”¹³ Ten days later Shell sent out a letter informing all municipalities of this turn of events. This action was motivated by fears that SSNC would not inform all relevant parties and that Shell thus risked losing contracts.¹⁴ The focus on municipalities continued during the next year as a member of the youth wing of the Green Party called for municipalities to reject tenders from Shell. This call was seen as “annoying” by Shell but harmless due to national regulations, something they had learnt from previous campaigns.¹⁵ Thus, while managing the general image of Shell, they simultaneously sought to secure more concrete relations with big clients.

The case of securing business-to-business relations in Sweden is an illustrative example of similar processes in other subsidiaries. When the city council of Cambridge discussed a boycott, meetings with local politicians were set up to convince them to change their mind, again this was conducted through providing a counter-frame portraying Shell as responsible and the claims made from SMOs exaggerated. These lobbying efforts were described as presenting information. A similar thing took place in early 1996 when Shell Canada described how a tender for supplying fuel to the Toronto Metro was initially voted down, but after lobbying, the votes for accepting Shell’s tender were in favour.¹⁶ As such, we can see that the actions taken by the Swedish subsidiary based on the BM strategy exhibited a similar dynamic as in other countries. The performances developed in this respect concerned directly lobbying those actors able to influence policy. At an international level, there was also lobbying with the aim of protecting Shell’s interests, such as a meeting with UK politician Tony Lloyd stating: “Lloyd’s influence on Labour’s Nigerian policy and Robin Cook (shadow Foreign Affairs Secretary) is considerable and the meeting was very

³ Sitrep 04/12/95; W/E 26/07/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁴ Summary, 27/02/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁵ Naturskyddsföreningen, 17/11/95, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁶ Bojkottuppmärksamhet, 15/11/95, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁷ IS.GW/md 30/01/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁸ Sitrep 24/01/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁹ Môte, 30/01/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁰ Letter to SNCC, 18/12/95, F4B2; The Niger Delta Environmental Survey, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹¹ BM Contract, 27/02/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹² BM Contract, 27/02/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹³ Sitrep 08/03/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁴ Sitrep 18/03/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁵ Sitrep W/E 03/04/97; W/E 2/5/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁶ Sitrep 19/01/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

useful.”¹⁷

Fears of a consumer boycott of Shell's products also entailed a different performance: surveys. In these, Shell OpCos tracked customer opinions about the company in relation to conflicts and how this influenced their choice of dealer. For example, Shell Australia conducted surveys and could in late 1995 state that “there are no signs yet of an effective consumer boycott.”¹⁸ Such surveys were performed continuously during the period of the campaign beginning in November 1995.¹⁹ Another performance aimed at countering a boycott from consumers involved distributing information leaflets at service stations, which occurred in the UK. However, this seems to have backfired as the availability of information attracted attention to the issue. Retailers were thus told not to keep leaflets visible but only hand them out when asked.²⁰ This shows the adaptiveness of Shell's performances in relation to the campaign. It further demonstrates a conflict between presenting the Shell HQ perspective to customers and the need to mute the link between the brand and the events in Nigeria.

While both a consumer boycott and lost contracts were considered real threats, it was mainly in relation to the risk of losing contracts that Shell mobilised practical countermeasures in the form of meetings and lobbying politicians. Here the presentation of a counter-frame, ensuring the responsibility of the company and providing “evidence” for this was crucial. In the case of consumer boycotts, the efforts seem to have been limited to PR and analysing consumer behaviour. In retrospect, according to a company history, the Nigeria campaign had less implications for consumer choice than the Brent Spar campaign (Sluyterman, 2007 p.355).

5.2. Critical journalism: from attack to taking control

Press coverage of Shell's involvement in Nigeria quickly appeared in major newspapers around the world in November and December 1995. A wide range of SMOs also engaged in public claim-making aimed at swaying public opinion against Shell. These SMOs included the radical left but also youth organisations linked to centre-left parties and more radical environmental organisations such as The Friends of the Earth or Nature and Youth Sweden (Fältbiologerna). Typical contentious performances included leafletting outside service stations, non-violent civil disobedience aimed at disrupting the use of service stations and demonstrations in a number of cities.

The first output from Shell to change public opinion was the coordinated advertisement “Clear thinking in troubled times”. This full-page ad was in November 1995 translated and published in major European newspapers. The ad was highly confrontational, primarily by arguing that the blame for the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa might also be put on social movements. The confrontational strategy seems to have backfired as Shell began trying to shift the frame by arguing that while problems did exist in Nigeria, the company was an agent of positive change.²¹ This meant that when Shell was criticised, rather than pushing back on the allegations and removing oneself from engagement, they highlighted their own efforts to aid local communities and address environmental issues. This is in line with the findings of McDonnell and King (2013), saying that firms turn to prosocial claims when the intensity of a campaign increases. But as we saw above, Shell had with the creation of organizations like the Niger Delta Environmental Survey also acted proactively, anticipating critiques of their operations in Nigeria.

In June 12–14, 1996, Shell arranged a workshop to coordinate the

subsidiaries or OpCos with streamlined messages adapted to national contexts.²² A new information package was distributed in July, which “had been designed to ensure the harmonisation of messages and assist Operating units in their communications programmes at national level”.²³ When the final version of the communication plan was sent out, Shell UK argued that the strategy was “basically moving to our own ground rather than responding to the allegations made by the campaign”.²⁴

Attempts to shift the frame were carried out through active contact with reporters and sharing information countering critical articles. But Shell HQ also engaged in reactive media production. One example is illustrative: in 1995 the documentary *Delta Force* was produced and aired. As a response Shell produced their own movie *Shell in the Niger Delta*, painting a brighter image of their enterprise.²⁵ Similarly, when Ken Saro-Wiwa's defence attorney Orono Douglas in 1997 distributed a video showing oil spills in the Niger delta, Shell International Limited (SIL) with the help of the Nigerian subsidiary Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) produced a video *The Story of a Spill*.²⁶ Videos and the glossy briefing packages show how Shell engaged in visual communication and reframing (Lefserud et al., 2017). The production of these objects was clearly a relational construction countering the images put forth by activists combatting environmental destruction and poverty in the areas where Shell operated.

Shell also tracked themes that might attract attention to their involvement in Nigeria, such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's diary smuggled out of prison.²⁷ When news broke that a German publisher planned to publish it with the title *Flames of Hell: Nigeria and Shell*, Shell responded with legal action. Again, the confrontational strategy backfired and Shell had to drop the charges which was met with support by the Norwegian representative: “...news about Shell not taking legal action came very handy.”²⁸ Hoping to gain a more favourable image of their operations, Shell started to sponsor trips for journalists to Nigeria in June 1996.²⁹ The first trip to SPDC arrived on June 30, and later that year, four Danish and one Swedish journalist visited the area.³⁰ In the following sitrep the Norwegian subsidiary discusses a critical article from one of the visitors: “This appears to be the down-side of bringing in journalists: running the risk of them writing articles that are counter-productive to the purpose.”³¹ Clearly not all actors had accepted the counter-frames Shell was developing.

Rather than protecting specific contracts or keeping customers in the short-term, the strategy to change public opinion was aimed at the long-term goal of clearing Shell as the go-to target for protest, as the UK branch writes in a sitrep on 10 January 1996:

[...]the issue is no longer the single issue campaigns of Brent Spar or Nigeria or whatever the next one will be, but Shell itself – Acting, as John Wybrew has put it, as a ‘lightning conductor’ for the concerns of those who instinctively dislike and distrust the ethics, morality, standards, profit motive etc of big business/Multinationals/the fossil fuels industry.³²

²² Sitrep 06/06/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²³ Sitrep W/E 19/07/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁴ Sitrep 60/96, September 1996, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁵ Conf.Nigeria issue, Video, 08/11/95, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁶ Sitrep W/E 5/9/97; W/E 12/9/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁷ Sitrep 24/01/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁸ Sitrep 21/02/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁹ Sitrep 30/05/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁰ W/E 21/06/96; W/E 06/09/96; W/E 22/08/97 Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³¹ Sitrep W/E 13/9/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³² Sitrep 10/01/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁷ Sitrep 29/03/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁸ Sitrep 04/12/95, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

¹⁹ IFH, Nr 88.9510, 22/11/95, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²⁰ Sitrep 10/06/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

²¹ BM contract 27/02/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

Shell was the main MNC operating service and provider of service stations in Sweden at this time. Thus, in May 1997 when other oil operations, for instance, EXXON in Chad and Cameroun were criticised in the media, Shell feared that even though they did not own majority shares in these ventures, they would nevertheless become the target.³³ This speaks to research having highlighted that corporations that have been the target of campaigns, such as Shell in South Africa, are likely to have developed strategies that make them targets for future campaigns as well (McDonnell et al., 2015).

The long-term strategy for practically all subsidiaries when it came to the press was to distance Shell from the events in Nigeria and direct them towards the Nigerian government. When a hostage situation developed at Shell operations in Egwa in March 1997, hard restrictions regarding how Shell employees could talk to the press were circulated. The aim was to make sure that the story was framed as concerning a political disturbance and not Shell.³⁴ Silence on the issue was therefore encouraged because commenting on the issue could convey the message that Shell were part of the conflict. In the autumn of 1997, this and similar actions seem to have paid off, as they report that even though Nigeria is being discussed, Shell is almost absent from reports.³⁵ The question of the Ogoni-delta and oil had at that time thus been re-framed as a problem of inter-Nigerian conflict and separate from the operations of Shell. Shell could maintain the position that they as a company should not interfere in how governments treat their citizens and thus address human rights issues.³⁶ When it came to environmental issues, the position of non-interference seems to be more complicated as it was harder to plead innocence.³⁷

5.3. Public accusations: “Nip it in the bud” and outweigh with information

Apart from responding to bad press and the overall aim to reframe the issue, Shell also engaged directly with claim-makers on an individual level. Part of this strategy was to align the goals of SMOs with those of Shell, which echoes the strategies used in the South Africa boycott a few years earlier (Minefee & Bucheli, 2021).

As stated above, Shell engaged in direct contact with consumers and business clients through information and lobbying efforts. A crucial aspect of this strategy was to engage personally, which could potentially deescalate the conflict. In Germany the various petitions initiated by NGOs such as Greenpeace and Amnesty were answered almost in their entirety. In a summary from May 1996, the German subsidiary stated that they had received 5300 letters and 6172 signatories to petitions, and 11,501 of these received a reply.³⁸ By addressing individual concerns Shell could enact the role of a reasonable actor, responding to critique in a calm manner and give the impression that they genuinely cared for the developments in Nigeria rather than just the possibility to extract oil as Greenpeace argued.

Efforts was also taken to “nip it in the bud” and prevent critical perspectives to appear and spread. In January 1996 one

...employee reported that his childrens English boarding school was advertising lecture tomorrow Thursday by Oronto Douglas (see above) and another Nigerian on ‘Shells alleged environmental abuse’ as part of a conference on ‘Abuse of human rights and the

Environment in Nigeria’. Shell Centre spoke to the school authorities and have sent briefing; school somewhat embarrassed to find out they had been ‘had’.³⁹

Personal contact was important also when responding to SMOs. When demonstrations by the group “The Pecten Hunters” occurred outside the Shell offices in Stockholm in early 1997 or at the open-door event at the Shell refinery in Gothenburg in September 1997, the strategy was to invite a few protestors to discuss and hand over information and briefing material.⁴⁰ Though not explicitly stated in the sitreps or other documents, this type of personal contact seems to have been important for Shell for offering their view, and given their extensive network of information, they were able to provide a high level of detail that was difficult to oppose.

Further examples of personal contact concerned the question of whether to engage in debates and community meetings. Just as with other activities, Shell kept track of major events and debates but also smaller things through its different subsidiaries. How they took part in these or gathered information differed, from covert operations to large public debates. Engaging with major actors and NGOs such as amnesty and Greenpeace was preferred, and Shell actively stayed away from debates where they risked not being able to share their point of view i.e., proclaiming their counter-frames. For example, when the Green Screen film festival took place in London in 1996, Shell UK argued: “We will put a mole into the session; Shell Centre judge there is no point in having an ‘official’ Shell representative there as an Aunt Sally.”⁴¹ Similar reasons for not taking an active part were expressed in relation to a debate organised by the Fourth World Society in Stockholm in February 1997.⁴² Since the backlash of the public statement following the hanging of the Ogoni Nine in 1995 Shell thus seems to have been vary of ending up as the accused, always aiming to be heard as one voice among many, claiming virtues such as an open and balanced debate. Strategies known within environmental PR since the 1970s (Aronczyk & Espinoza, 2022).

When Shell engaged in debates, information and coordination were crucial. Not only should representatives of Shell come to these occasions well-prepared with the communication packages and numbers from the Niger Delta environmental Survey, but they should also adapt the weight of their response depending on the setting. Often, the briefing and communication package developed in 1996 seems to have been sufficient to counter claims against the corporation. But in some instances, Shell used other means. In May 1997 a debate was arranged by Amnesty Sweden, where MOSOP (the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People) representative Deebii Nwiado gave his view of the issue. The Swedish subsidiary had requested support from HQ, and Barbara Lawrence, coordinator of the Nigerian issue and Nigerian herself, tried to disarm the opposition by stating that the issue was complex and “that we are all Nigerians and we ourselves have to solve our big problems”, thus ultimately turning it into an internal political issue. This framing, according to Shell representatives, was picked up by one of the panel-lists, a professor from the Stockholm School of Economics: “To have MNCs interfere is not a healthy state of affairs in the World community.”⁴³ This process could be characterized as what Kneip (2013, pp.192–3) has called concealed counteraction in which the demands from SMOs are turned against the movements, pointing to internal inconsistencies rather than saying the accusation is wrong.

Choosing the arena, arriving well-prepared and focusing on face-to-face interactions (or at least individual-to-individual) seem to have

³³ Sitrep W/E 02/05/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁴ Letter 27/3/97; Press release 24/03/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁵ Sitrep W/E 24/10/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁶ Q & A, Anniversary of KSW, 10/11/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁷ Sitrep W/E 21/3/97; 04/01/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁸ Sitrep 30/05/96; see also W/E 05/06/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

³⁹ Sitrep 01/02/96 see also 13/03/96; 09/04/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁴⁰ Sitrep W/E 14/02/97; Letter 14/9/1997, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁴¹ Sitrep 26/02/96 see also 01/03/96; 06/03/96, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁴² Sitrep W/E 14/02/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

⁴³ Letter, 23/05/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

aided Shell in slowly moving from the bench of the accused towards one interest among many, and an actor that tried to do good rather than a repressive actor protecting revenues and the possibility to extract more oil.

5.4. Property destruction: ignoring and creating frames of illegitimacy

One area where these counter-frames were especially hard to establish was in relation to the occasions of property destruction that appear in the sitreps. Shell stated in late November 1995 that “If this is the start of a major campaign it may well be linked to direct action of some sort.”⁴⁴ In late 1995 Shell service stations were attacked in the small town of Umeå in northern Sweden. These attacks, as argued by Shell, Burson Marsteller and the petroleum dealer organisation PRF, were considered an offspring of the international calls for boycott. The latter even blamed SSNC for past and future sabotage against Shell dealers.⁴⁵ According to the security service in Sweden, these performances were carried out with the intention of changing public opinion with regard to Shell.⁴⁶ Sitreps gathered information on arson, spray-painted messages and property destruction but this tactic from SMOs seems to have been most prevalent in Sweden and Finland. Even so, the framing of Shell as a legitimate target for property destruction was not met with any substantial counter-framing strategies in the transnational sitreps. Rather, the issue was delegated to police and Secret service as well as the local organisations of petroleum dealers. Hence, the idea seems to have been that if public opinion swayed in favour of Shell and if the demands for a boycott were cancelled, the attacks would stop.

For the individual station, sabotage was a problem as evident in heated letters to SSNC and in internal communication, whereas other issues occupied the minds of the subsidiary and HQ. This structure and the relative negligence of property destruction as a problem in the documents, especially as the attacks continue long after the sitreps cease, show the low level of threat posed by these performances. In the summer of 1997, Shell concluded that “with the exception of small pockets of activity, the issue is showing widespread signs of campaign fatigue”⁴⁷ and the sitreps ceased in 1998. It thus appears that Shell felt secure in having created a repertoire able to meet any remaining contentious performances from social movements. By distancing Shell from the threats and acts of property destruction these actions were made illegitimate and Shell could describe them as fringe or extremes rather than legitimate claim-makers.

6. Summary

In this paper we have traced the internal strategies used and developed by the extractive company Shell during the period 1995–1998. The analysis was possible through our unique access to company archives. This material has enabled us to see the adaptive way in which Shell engaged with SMOs and extended our understanding beyond rhetorical analysis. We argue that a combination of campaign frames, political and temporal structures activated responses all through the Shell organization but also developed according to the (non-)efficacy of different actions. Thereby we expand and nuance previous research and argue that frames are not organizationally distributed and responding to specific contexts but are rather adaptive technologies made available through the MNC networked structure. First, we analysed the practical communicative technology in the form of the situational reports and how these enabled Shell to act in a coordinated fashion along the different

subsidiaries. But also, how the division of labour onto subsidiaries enabled a high granularity in responding to allegations and framing attempts by SMOs and politicians ranging from legal measures, PR and the tracking of specific individuals.

We further showed that Shell made use of a number of strategies to craft counter-frames. These strategies included the creation of information packages distributed to subsidiaries, lobbying of members of national parliaments, the use of PR firms to devise local strategies as well as surveys, personal contacts (meetings, letters, and phone calls) and participation in panels, and—in the case of property destruction—filing reports to police. We also saw how Shell early on investigated the possibility to legally muzzle politicians speaking out on the issue.

In terms of the issues Shell engaged with, we showed that apart from trying to sway public opinion in favour of Shell through the use of for example embedded journalists, Shell engaged heavily to maintain existing contracts with larger customers such as municipalities and organisations in order to limit the engagement in a boycott. This shows that framing was not only dependent on rhetoric or the public image of the industry but also on the legitimacy of the Shell among key customers. Further, their dialogue with SMOs were contingent on the respectability and size of the movement. Large SMOs and interest groups were seen as key in the counter framing process while small and/or more radical social movements got minimal attention. The limited response from Shell on property destruction in the transnational sitreps is also an interesting find since the impossibility to engage in counter-framing made these attacks more protracted than the boycott. Further empirical analysis is therefore needed to understand how and in which cases extractive industries respond to such opposition.

We have shown how Shell, by building on experiences from previous campaigns, from the initial rejection of the accusation of human rights and environmental violations developed counter-frames highlighting responsibility and while at the same time created sharp dividing lines between them and the Nigerian state. By producing a corporate self-regulating service engaging with both public and private interests as well as politicians around the world, fears of systems such as the UN code of conduct could be held at bay and promised the continued exploration of fossil fuels in what has become one of the worlds most polluted areas.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No relevant financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to report.

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- ⁴⁵ Frågor., 30/01/96, Volume F4B2, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.
- ⁴⁶ “Kampanj mot Shell, Sammanställning maj-dec 1996”, nr 201304-2189, 10/12/96, SÄPO, Swedish Security Forces.
- ⁴⁷ Nigeria update 28/7/97, Volume F4B4, AB Svenska Shell, CBH, Stockholm.

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Further reading

Source material is found in the archives of AB Svenska shell, volume F4B2, F4B4 and F4B5 at the centre for business history, Stockholm, Sweden (CBH). Apart from this, one document from the Swedish security forces (SÄPO) have been used. Full reference to each document is found in footnotes.