

Corporate environmentalism and the making and visualization of environmental knowledge

In the wake of the Brundtland report 1987, corporate environmentalism became a hot topic among industrial managers. Environmentally friendly behaviour became something to be measured, visualized and circulated as knowledge. Something to be represented for stakeholders as an important part of industry practices. But how? One of the solutions was the creation of green accounts including the use of Life Cycle Assessments (LCA), a tool developed as a way to measure and visualize the environmental aspects of a product from cradle to grave. Sometimes industry practices were changed to be more environmentally friendly. Sometimes not, only the linguistic and visual representation of the practices, which led to discussions about “green-washing”.

In the paper, the making of environmental knowledge in Danish triple helix constellations in the 1990s is analysed. The aim is, through the empirical case, to look at how exactly environmentally friendly behaviour was created as a relevant topic for the industry, and how this behaviour was translated into something, which could be represented on paper as text, numbers, standards, diagrams and ecolabels in green accounts and the like. This translation included among other things the creation and use of complex databases and software, which can be analysed as an example of post-normal science including high degrees of uncertainty and value conflicts.

Using STS concepts such as translation, representation and mediation, the black box we call sustainability, an important part of corporate communication, will be analysed as something constructed historically.