

Short Paper SIM Conference 2024

Climate Targets at the frontlines: the case of “The Business Ambition for 1.5°C” campaign

Abstract:

This study examines the strategic communication of unachieved climate targets, focusing on how organizations handle accountability and public perception, particularly within the "The Business Ambition for 1.5°C" campaign led by the Science-Based Targets Initiative and UN Global Compact. The campaign aimed to align corporate climate actions with scientific guidelines, yet many participants failed to meet their targets, drawing media scrutiny and raising concerns about the credibility of such commitments. The research aims to explore how these failures are framed in media and corporate communications and how organizations manage these narratives. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study involves an inductive and deductive analysis of media coverage, corporate press releases, and accountability reports. Preliminary findings indicate a shift from market-based punishment framing to a civic framing, where climate failures are seen as societal issues rather than corporate missteps. This reframing impacts how organizations are perceived and can influence public trust and stakeholder expectations. The study contributes to understanding the role of communication in managing climate target accountability, offering insights for organizations to navigate the challenges of environmental commitments.

Key words: *Climate targets, strategic communication, framing, climate failures*

Research aims:

The paper explores the strategic communication processes surrounding unachieved climate targets. The primary goal is to understand the communication mechanisms that shape organizations'/corporations' accountability of these targets. Specifically, the study investigates the organizational communication environment in which climate target accountability is situated, focusing on transparency, monitoring actors, media framing, and communication interactions within this environment. Additionally, the research aims to analyze how corporations strategically navigate and manage their communication about climate targets, particularly in situations of missed objectives. Recent media coverage has increasingly highlighted companies stepping back from their climate commitments, declaring missed objectives, or reframing previously defined targets (Financial Times, 2024). This issue has become particularly pressing as governments themselves acknowledge the unfeasibility or improbability of meeting their climate goals -i.e., Scotland, UK, Germany- (Reisinger et al., 2024). For instance, the Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) recently released an evaluation of companies participating in the "Race to Zero" campaign under the UN's Business Ambition 1.5°C, revealing that 30% of the participants have been rejected due to unmet targets (SBTi, 2024), which has attracted significant media scrutiny (Pucker, 2024).

Thus, the debate is both timely and relevant, yet it lacks systematic examination from the organizational viewpoint. Despite its importance, the examination of how climate targets and their non-achievement are communicated and with opening to what possible consequences remains underdeveloped. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the issue empirically and theoretically, focusing on communication dynamics. The research will thus complement adjacent research in other disciplines tackling the issue of climate target accountability and their achievement.

Background

By mid-2024, nearly 150 countries, accounting for about 89% of global carbon emissions, committed to net zero targets, marking a shift from stagnation in global climate governance to a unified commitment to decarbonization (Net-zero Tracker, 2024; Hale et al., 2024).

The concept began to surface in 1991 with early discussions on carbon removal and reduction strategies, though it was not yet a prominent topic, as evidenced by the limited scholarly articles during this period (Green and Reyes, 2023). The Kyoto Protocol era (2005-2011) saw the term gain traction, with emerging definitions and increased academic interest, though the focus was still largely on emissions reductions (Green and Reyes, 2023; Allen et al., 2022). The lead-up to the Paris Agreement (2012-2015) intensified discussions on global emissions targets, culminating in a scientific consensus around net-zero as a critical component of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. Post-Paris Agreement, net zero became enshrined in international law, prompting widespread commitments from countries, cities, and firms (Green and Reyes, 2023).

An important case that contributed to the wider adoption of climate targets was the "The Business Ambition for 1.5°C" initiated by the Science-Based Targets Initiative and UN Global Compact, aiming to engage corporations in setting science-based decarbonization targets aligned with IPCC guidelines. The Business Ambition for 1.5°C campaign ran from June 2019 to October 2021. Companies that committed to set science-based targets as part of the campaign had 24 months to fulfill, and net-zero commitments had an additional extension to January 31, 2024. More than 1,000 corporations joined the campaign, and an evaluation report was released in March 2024, highlighting organizations' display of validated near-term and long-term commitments. Following the report's release, major media articles highlighted corporations whose climate targets were removed from alignment with campaign goals and SBTi standards. These articles reflected a growing narrative questioning the feasibility and accountability of climate targets, highlighting: a) the role of corporations and their climate communication strategies, b) the role of monitoring bodies, c) stakeholders' changing expectations towards climate targets and their feasibility with current plans, and d) SBTi's legitimacy.

Starting from this context, the research aims to first understand how the "The Business Ambition for 1.5°C" campaign was framed in the news media, and subsequently, how

the issue of climate target failures is framed. The research further seeks to analyze how organizations whose climate targets were removed communicate these issues.

Methodology:

Given the unique phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative case study is the most appropriate method to answer the research questions. The case study method examines a complex and contemporary problem situated within a real-world context, namely the communication management of climate targets (Yin, 2018). Through an in-depth qualitative approach, a case study relies on numerous sources of evidence within defined boundaries to advance theory related to the case (Yin, 2018). The value of the case study is to offer analytic or conceptual generalizations that can corroborate, modify, and advance existing theory (Yin, 2018).

Data collection is in progress and will be conducted in a two-stage coding process:

1. **Sampling Strategy:** The first stage uses a purposive sampling strategy, aiming to identify a sample of rich, helpful sources that can provide the most information regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). This stage focuses on data collection concerning the "The Business Ambition for 1.5°C" campaign and the analysis of the 2024 SBTi accountability reports, media coverage, and related organizational communications (e.g., Microsoft, P&G, Unilever, JBS, ArcelorMittal, New Zealand Aviation, and others).
2. **Framing Analysis:** In the second stage, the communication of corporations whose climate targets were removed will be analyzed through an iterative process of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis. The sequence of methods includes:
 - Summarizing key findings from the SBTi accountability report 2024.
 - Identifying corporations that have missed their targets and defining an initial codebook.
 - Conducting media and corporate communication analysis (press releases) related to the "1.5 Business Ambition" campaign accountability report 2024.
 - Conducting inductive and deductive media and corporate communication analysis for SBTi corporations identified as failing their targets.

Preliminary Results and discussion:

The first part of the case study analysis is proceeding with the development of a theory and an inductive codebook for the analysis of the framing of the "The Business Ambition for 1.5°C" and the issue of climate target failures. The initial codebook is under construction and has highlighted the following categories: Frames of issue evaluation (civic, moral, market-economic), system of transparency monitoring (actors, transparency agents, transparency framing), topics, and discourses.

A preliminary result that seems to emerge is a specific framing for climate failures compared to other types of organizational setbacks. Typically, for organizations failing strategic targets, a market-based economic control framing is used, where punishment is intended through market outcomes (Jiang et al., 2024; Edwards, 2018). An interesting pattern emerging in the debate is that instead of using a market-based punishment framing, a civic framing (Jiang et al., 2024; Edwards, 2018) is enacted, whereby missed targets are considered a civic/moral duty or a matter of techno-scientific responsibility, thus not evaluated as a corporate matter but as a flexible societal common good.

The communication of unachieved climate targets by organizations can both erode reputation and trust or, conversely, position these corporations as frontrunners, setting a precedent for others in shaping the framing of climate targets management. Structurally, this positions such organizations as issue owners (Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006), where proactive management of communication regarding their failures can potentially mitigate negative impacts.

Reference:

- Allen, M. R., Friedlingstein, P., Girardin, C. A., Jenkins, S., Malhi, Y., Mitchell-Larson, E., Peters, G. P., & Rajamani, L. (2022). Net Zero: Science, origins, and implications. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 47(1), 849–887. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-112320-105050>
- Business ambition for 1.5°C - science based targets*. (n.d.). Science Based Targets Initiative. <https://sciencebasedtargets.org/business-ambition-for-1-5c>
- Edwards, L. (2020). Transparency, publicity, Democracy, and Markets: inhabiting tensions through hybridity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(11), 1545–1564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764220945350>
- Financial times*. (n.d.). Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/c9fee776-1471-442c-aae8-8d78fe60faeb>
- Green, J. F., & Reyes, R. S. (2023). The history of net zero: can we move from concepts to practice? *Climate Policy*, 23(7), 901–915. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2023.2218334>
- Hale, T., Wetzer, T., Abebe, S. K., Allen, M., Amel-Zadeh, A., Armour, J., Axelsson, K., Caldecott, B., Dias, L., Fankhauser, S., Franta, B., Hepburn, C., Mbeva, K., Rajamani, L., Smith, S., & Stuart-Smith, R. (2024). Turning a groundswell of climate action into ground rules for net zero. *Nature Climate Change*, 14(4), 306–308. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-024-01967-7>

- Jiang, X., Kim, S., & Lu, S. (2024). Accountability of corporate emissions reduction targets. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4676649>
- Meijer, M., & Kleinnijenhuis, J. (2006). Issue News and Corporate Reputation: Applying the theories of agenda setting and issue ownership in the field of business communication. *Journal of Communication*, 56(3), 543–559. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00300.x>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: a guide to design and implementation*.
- Pucker, K (2024). Companies are scaling back sustainability pledges. Here's what they should do instead *Harvard Business Review*
- Reisinger, A., Cowie, A. L., Geden, O., & Khourdajie, A. A. (2024). Science-based targets miss the mark. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-024-01535-z>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and methods*. <http://cds.cern.ch/record/2634179>