

Pragmatism, Truth and Social Accounting Research

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Abstract

Purpose:

To introduce pragmatism as a useful approach to social accounting research and to offer the pragmatic notion of truth as a way of redirecting thinking within this field.

Design/methodology/approach:

We explore the concept of truth as it has been used within critical social accounting research and contrast this to a pragmatic notion of truth. We then explore the various ways the pragmatic notion of truth extends key areas of social accounting research.

Findings:

Ideal corporate accountability has been central to the conception of truth within social accounting research. However, this reliance on ideals has underpinned a fairly restrictive conceptual framework that risks losing its ability to inform change. In contrast, pragmatism sees truth as *enacted*. This means that truth is whatever is useful when dealing with broader social and environmental issues. Adopting this core idea of pragmatism may have many ramifications for social accounting research particularly in relation to stakeholder participation and social reporting.

Research limitations/implications:

Pragmatism offers a variety of novel ways to open up social accounting research so that it might be more successful in both informing and supporting change.

Originality/value:

We argue that pragmatism offers a useful and practical conceptual model for stakeholder participation based on the concept of *deliberative democracy* as well as a novel view of social reporting based on the idea of *sensemaking*. In this way the ideas of pragmatism both inform and inspire the social accounting project as it pursues its ultimate goal of sustainability.

Keywords

pragmatism, truth, social and environmental accounting, social accounting research, engagement, critical theory

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1. Introduction

A spectre is haunting the world - the spectre of planetary destruction. Social and environmental problems are on the rise, of which the most visible include massive inequalities in income and health both between and within nations (e.g. Marmot, 2005; Milanovic, 2006; UNDP, 2010), accelerating losses to biodiversity (IUCN, 2008; WWF, 2008), and global warming (IPCC, 2008). Despite clear evidence of this destruction from the scientific community companies continue to pollute, while strategically disguising the impacts of their operations in their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports (Gray, 1992; Gray, 2006; Milne et al. 2008). Accounting here is used by corporations and their managers to protect their profits by camouflaging the truth about their environmental and social impacts. Despite lofty appeals to democratic ideals and talk of so-called stakeholder engagement those most affected by detrimental corporate actions are ignored and marginalised (Owen and Cooper, 2007). Possibly most worrying is the growing inability to hold companies accountable for their actions and enforce transparency due to the steady advancement of corporate power and the corresponding retreat of Western governments crippled by debt. Our increasingly dismal predicament is moving ever further away from the greater goals of corporate accountability and of sustainability more generally.

This depiction of a haunting spectre is an image of our circumstances as constructed by a critically orientated sub-set of social accounting research. Despite its gloomy outlook, this stream of social accounting research has produced a well-developed and insightful literature, immeasurably valuable to our understanding of corporate responsibility. The empirical findings of social accounting research detail a wide range of issues within the broader areas of stakeholder engagement (e.g. Gray, et al., 1997; Owen et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2001; Gray, 2002; Bebbington et al., 2007;), social reporting (e.g. Gray et al., 1995; Gray, 2001; Milne, 2002; Bebbington et al., 2008), and social management accounting practices (Gray and Bebbington, 2000; Larrinaga-Gonzalez and Bebbington, 2001; Ball, 2005; Dey, 2007; Durden, 2008). While the broader narrative delivered by this stream of social accounting research is negative in its assessment of the ability of corporations to improve their accountability to stakeholders it is driven by the pursuit of a noble ideal. This ideal is the pursuit of a more equitable and transparent world, in which new and radical forms of accounting, such as social reports, expose the grave truth about how actual corporate social and environmental performance affects stakeholders (e.g.

Bebbington and Gray, 2001; Gray, 1992; Lehman, 2001). It is hoped that stakeholders, by seeing this 'truth', will be informed and thereby motivated to place pressure on corporations to change their operations towards genuine sustainability.

The broader social accounting literature claims to follow the tenets of pragmatism (Burritt, 2012). As if to balance the negative temperament of its more radical elements, social accounting research is in general (Gray, 2002, p. 688):

... deeply sympathetic to...the different streams of the alternative/critical project but a project which 'gets its hands dirty' and is consequently, partially mired in the impurities of pragmatism... [Here the social accounting project] sit[s] between the niceties of rigorous critique and the inconsistencies of pragmatism.

Here Gray argues that the current social accounting project sits somewhere on a line between the muck of pragmatic engagement and the purity of critique. Others have argued that "Pragmatism – in both the philosophical and general usage senses – has lain at the heart of the social accounting project(s)" (Tinker and Gray, 2003, p. 748). These claims to pragmatism are interesting considering practitioners have found social accounting research uninformative in addressing actual problems surrounding sustainable development (e.g. Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2006; Evans et al., 2010, Wiek et al., 2011). This has also been an issue for organisational literature more generally where practitioners ignore findings of critical research because they perceive it as having no practical value (see e.g. Weick, 2001; van de Ven, 2007; Evans et al., 2010). For practitioners much of the social accounting literature suffers from an unhelpful negativity, cynicism and detachment from practice, even presenting an adversarial view of managers and shareholders (e.g. Burritt and Schaltegger, 2010). The result is a loss of potential constructive academia-practice engagement in the area of sustainable development (e.g. Evans et al., 2011; Nutley et al., 2003; Rynes, 2001; Scholz, 2011).

In this paper we argue that, in order to really follow a pragmatic approach in social accounting research, a core concept of pragmatism must be embraced, that is, the pragmatic notion of *truth*. We argue that the conception of truth can have repercussions throughout a particular research approach. Critical social accounting research has detailed how practice has failed in relation to accountability ideals, seeking to expose a certain,

external and potentially emancipatory 'truth' through accounting. This truth is that corporations are responsible for planetary destruction and that managers ignore or strategically disguise their destructive effects - something that we must acknowledge and act on in order to survive as a species. In contrast pragmatism has a very different notion of truth at its core. Its basis is a more utilitarian notion of truth whereby truth is the trustworthy or useful quality of models and schemes used to make our experiences and values coherent (Haack, 1976). This is why contemporary pragmatists refer to 'truth making' or the process of enacting truth (Weick, 1995). This pragmatic notion of truth challenges certain core ideas within the social accounting project, such as stakeholder democracy and transparency. In following a pragmatic line of thinking we offer a number of alternative ideas to open up the approach of social accounting research in relation to these core ideas and free it from its constrained focus on abstract ideals and practice's failure to meet them. It is hoped that introducing pragmatism to social accounting research will offer a positive ethic for engagement. In taking pragmatism seriously we attempt to answer calls raised by social accounting researchers to develop a case for pragmatism (Gray, 2002, p. 688, footnote 3) in a way that challenges and extends the established ways of thinking in the field.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The next section explores the notion of truth as offered within critical theory and subsequently taken up in social accounting research. In contrast, Section 3 develops a pragmatic conception of truth and introduces associated relevant concepts, such as Weick's sense making. Section 4 makes two specific cases for the introduction of pragmatism within social accounting research. Within each case we offer the ideas of pragmatism as a way of opening previously closed or negative thinking so that accounting research is better able to create new knowledge and practical contributions in relation to tackling social and environmental problems. In section 5 we bring the arguments of the paper together and propose a pragmatic approach that complements that of critical social accounting research so that a dialogue between the two approaches can ensue.

2. Revealing the 'truth' through social accounting research

To date a stream of social accounting research has been highly influenced by the work of critical theorists such as Marx (Tinker and Gray, 2003), Habermas (Unerman and Bennett,

2004; Laughlin, 1987), Feire (Thomson and Bebbington, 2005) and Taylor (Lehman, 2006). The ideas of these critical theorists differ quite radically from pragmatism philosophers in relation to the conception of 'truth'. For critical theory, 'ideals' have a central role to play in the notion of truth, thus we start by exploring this connection after which we will draw out how these conceptions have manifested within current thinking in social accounting research.

Generally speaking, critical theory has a view of 'truth' which is concerned primarily with the essence of phenomena in its potentiality. In simpler terms, truth is concerned with both the current state of phenomena but also its movement towards what it can become. As Hegel put it, the fulfilment of potentialities inherent in reality is called "the truth" (as discussed by Marcuse, 1954). The movement of reality (or phenomena) towards its potential is a constant process driven by identifying the negative qualities that individuals experience in their current state of living, such as oppression, inequality, and cultural non-fulfilment. Truth is realised when these negative qualities are gradually abolished and potentialities are progressively realised in reality (Marcuse, 1954). However, this new state has its own set of negative qualities. As Marcuse (1960, p. 136) puts it: "something negative ... which things desert for another state, which again reveals itself as negative". Thus truth is uncovered and fulfilled in a historical process through the collective efforts of individuals whereby society becomes more self-conscious about its negative qualities and potential.

For Marcuse, and indeed Marx, the driving force behind the historical process of realisation is a 'universal essence', a basic but denied reality at the very core of a historical time period. For Marx this universal essence was the process of realisation about labour and how it becomes freed from the subservient identity imposed by capitalism (*Entäußerung*), realising its essence as a self-directed and self-creating entity. While Marx wanted people to realise that as labour they constitute themselves and the world, critically inspired social accounting scholars want people to realise their (dialogic) indexical relationship with the physical world (Gray, 2010, 2002; Milne, 1996). For the social accounting project the universal essence of our historical period is the central importance of the natural environment to our lives and the social world.

Communicating our impacts on the natural environment has become the central concern for social accounting researchers. Within this approach the scientific community has been seen as the trusted gate keeper of knowledge about the physical world. However, the great complexity of scientific findings is usually summarised as pointing to certain, imminent planetary destruction (Beder, 2002; Gray, 2010). While one could argue that this largely unquestioned acceptance of science is more positivist than critical in orientation, it is, however, an important way of anchoring the research field in the most important of concerns - environmental destruction – as well as an underlying realist epistemology. The immediacy and ‘physical realness’ of environmental concerns has been a catalyst for the development of radical accounting practices that expose the existence of corporate social and environmental impacts (Gray, 2010).

For critically orientated social accounting research understanding the *truth* is to realise our *essential* relationship with nature; that our social existence is reliant on the physical world for its survival. Accounting and reporting have a central role in this realisation because they can make organisations and their activities more transparent to a wider group of stakeholders, such as communities, owners, customers, management and employees. Through this function stakeholders and publics are able to hold corporations to account in a way that “determines, reflects, reifies, strengthens and solidifies power relationships between accountee and accountor or company and stakeholder” (Gray, 1992, p. 413). Here accounting is a way of potentially exposing, enhancing and developing accountability relationships between stakeholders and their organisations as well as establishing stakeholder rights to corporate information (Gray, 1992). Thus in true critical spirit social accounting scholars study accounting in relation to its potentiality as a mechanism for delivering the ideal of accountability. This they argue, is the first essential element of any neo-pluralist or participatory democracy (Gray, 1992; Lehman, 2001).

In a strange way then the realist epistemology attributed to ecological science provides a *raison d’être* for idealism within social accounting research. In other words, it is only through an uncompromising idealism that we can combat absolute and certain planetary destruction. Anything less than the ideal accountability relationship between corporations and stakeholders means planetary failure. The role of researchers is then to realise certain ideals surrounding accountability and to imagine new ways of accounting for sustainability in which the goal, according to Gray (2010), is “to construct a fully reliable narrative that

speaks of sustainability at the corporate or organizational level” (p. 57). These imagined accounts could represent a range of unheard voices and opinions about corporate activities as potential counter narratives, with the potential to expose both the un-sustainability of corporations as well as the scientifically unfounded narratives promoted by companies and more broadly by capitalism (Gray, 2002, 2010). Also in capturing and communicating scientifically accurate information about corporate un-sustainability it is hoped that accounting can expand corporate morality. This may mean the creation of a more personal and organic form of accounting, requiring a closer proximity to those affected (Gray et al., 2006; Lehman, 2006; Baker and Roberts, 2011).

Despite the existence of accountability ideals, empirical evidence over the last 20 years has shown that stakeholders have had little ability to hold corporations to account in practice (Adams, 2004; O’Dwyer and Owen, 2007; Gray, 2010). Specifically, this paper explores the failure of transparency and the failure of stakeholder participation. Research surrounding transparency focuses on the language of reports and the exchanges between stakeholders and organisations. This literature has studied the ways in which reporting and accounting have been captured in terms of both the language and metrics used to represent corporate performance in relation to social and environmental issues. Empirical research also shows that in more direct forms of stakeholder engagement, where stakeholders have been in direct contact with organisations, accounting fails to facilitate a transparent exchange of critical information, instead working to preserve a level of information opaqueness between stakeholders and companies as well as promoting the political ideas of managers (Ball et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2000, 2001; O’Dwyer, 2003; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005).

Thus, since the original ideas of Gray and Lehman, social accounting research has been primarily concerned with detailing ways the practice of accounting has failed to live up to the original ideals of accountability. In a Hegelian sense these failures are the *negative* in society which social accounting researchers seek to expose and thus abolish. Exposing the failure of accountability and the detrimental social and environmental activities of companies reveals the internal contradictions within, and logical impossibility of, our current capitalist system. What gets lost in this process of exposure is the hard *truth* — that we are unsustainable as a society yet paradoxically dependent on the natural environment for our survival. This is our universal essence.

This paper will later explore the problems that have arisen from over-indulging in the critical notions of truth for social accounting research. In the next section we outline ideas of pragmatism, which we hope offer an alternative view of truth focusing on neither failure nor ideals and propose a complementary approach to social accounting research.

3. Enacting truth through pragmatism

“...the world stands really malleable, waiting to receive its final touches at our hands... Man engenders truths upon it”

- William James (1995, p. 123)

Pragmatism is a large and well developed philosophy, explored by many great writers, such as John Dewey, William James and Richard Rorty, to name only a few. Despite its long history it is not a well explicated philosophical position in accounting research (Gray, 2002). This section seeks to clarify the position of pragmatism in order to bring a philosophical grounding to a pragmatic approach within future social accounting research.

It is the pragmatic idea of truth that is at the heart of the difference between the pragmatic and other approaches to research. Pragmatism has been referred to as having a ‘contemplative’ conception of knowledge wherein truth is conceived of as the totality of all true propositions, that is, those that have stood up indefinitely to repeated inter-subjectively recognised tests (Ray, 2004). This means that linguistic mediation is central to the process of defining truth. Pragmatism is concerned with the communication between individuals and groups who reciprocally know and recognise each other, which means for pragmatism ‘objectivity’ does not escape the limitations of community and society but only desires for inter-subjective agreement (Rorty, 1991, p. 28). For pragmatists this is also true for scientific judgement, as Rorty (2007, p. 139) claims that “there are no acts ... which we can perform that will put us in a relation to an object different than that of simply talking about that object in sentences whose truth we have taken into our lives”. Thus knowledge is constituted through argumentative procedures and criticisable validity claims. This view of truth under pragmatism, as inter-subjectively and linguistically mediated, differs from the notion of truth developed within critical social accounting research. While a pragmatist may study the linguistic interaction and construction of the physical environment through accounting and reporting, this contrasts to critical social accounting research in which the

construction of meaning in accounting is assessed and constructed against certain and positivist notions about the physical and social world.

The pragmatist's idea of truth as something that is inter-subjectively agreed upon means that truth is in the hands of its subjects; this is an empowering interpretation of truth. For instance, Dewey argues that reality does not have an essential truth which is waiting to be discovered but is rather made or constructed in order to 'deal' practically with problems. This pragmatic notion of 'truth as made' is a social constructivist understanding of truth — we make our own truth through language and symbolic representation in order to deal with problems (see, for example, Wicks and Freeman, 1998). These social representations in turn enact our outer physical world as they mediate our social interaction. In this sense 'truth is made' when we apply ideas to a problem in the world, or as Weick (1979) would say, when we enact our environment. He argues that organisations have particular substance as a result of the choices and meanings which we, as individuals and collectives, ascribe to them over time. In a process which Weick calls 'circular causation' our language and models for interpretation act as structures that shape and give substance to the context in which we operate, as well as the options to act from which we choose.

Truth therefore *becomes* or is *realised* when ideas are made true by their effects when applied to events or situations. In this view, truth is 'right under our noses', always current, contemporary and never finite - it is what is useful in each moment. Whether an idea can be applied and change the world is therefore the measure of its truth. Thus the key determinant of truth is whether an idea is useful for *making* change, in other words, its usefulness in practice. James (1995, p. 77) is insightful here:

Pragmatism ... asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true", it says, "What concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will it be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"

Wicks and Freeman (1998, p. 129) define the notion of usefulness as information or knowledge that "help[s] people to better cope with the world or to create better organizations". In terms of social accounting research, usefulness may be judged by how

well it helps organisational participants reduce the negative social and environmental impacts of their operations and realise the goals of the community of stakeholders. This is different (but does not exclude) what has been referred to as a 'managerialistic' approach, which typically identifies environmentally beneficial projects that also improve financial performance (see Hart, 1995; Epstein and Roy, 1998; Epstein and Wisner, 2001; Porter and Kramer, 2002, 2006). Instead usefulness for pragmatists "simply requires those engaged in research or decision-making to scrutinize the practical relevance of a set of ideas as defined by their purposes and those shared by their community (e.g. within a country, a corporation, a research stream)" (Wicks and Freeman, 1998, p. 129).

Pragmatism moves the orientation of knowledge away from the failure of the actual to meet the ideal towards an understanding of how truth is constructed and enacted. Within the notion of enacted truth ideas are 'made true' when applied in practical situations. Pragmatism argues here that only in their applied state do theories become a source of understanding about the world; an understanding which reflects the complexity and richness of reality. Theories and ideals require experimentation and application to become truth. The next section develops the ideas of pragmatism further in relation to social accounting research.

4. Exploring pragmatism in social accounting research

In this section we explore the ways pragmatism can be used to complement and extend a number of specific ideas in social accounting research. The first two parts of this section explore the ideals surrounding the accountability of individual companies, particularly stakeholder participation and transparency. In the first part we explore the introduction of pragmatic ideas surrounding participation, which we will argue provides a potentially more useful model for engagement for sustainable development. The second part addresses the often referred to idea of transparency in social accounting research. The pragmatic notion that truth is enacted challenges common thinking about transparency and provides an opening for some other approaches to social accounting.

4.1. A pragmatic alternative to ideal stakeholder participation

Stakeholder participation has been widely celebrated amongst international bodies as a core concept of sustainable development. For instance the Rio declaration on sustainable development of 1992 emphasised the participation of stakeholders as a crucial requirement of sustainable development: "...environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level" (UNEP, 1992, Rio Declaration Principle 10). The Aarhus Convention of 1998 also mentions public participation as one of the three central pillars of sustainable development. More recently the "participation of major groups" was strongly praised in the Johannesburg Implementation Plan (UNSD, 2005).

In terms of social accounting research the commonly held aim of stakeholder participation is to hold corporations accountable for their broader social and environmental impacts (Gray, 2002; Owen et al., 2001; O'Dwyer, 2001). This accounting literature has studied the participation of stakeholders in "a multitude of practices where organisations adopt a structured approach to engaging with stakeholders", including questionnaires, focus groups, open forums/workshops, meetings and internet web forums (O'Dwyer, 2005, pp. 9-10). Within this literature the role of accounting in stakeholder participation has evolved. Originally the role of accounting was to deliver greater forms of accountability through openly communicating corporate performance in relation to stakeholder concerns, via sustainability reports and other forms of reporting (Roberts, 1991; Gray, 1992; Lehman, 1996; Lehman, 2001; Yongvanich and Guthrie, 2006; Gray, 2010). However, reporting is a one-way communication, which does not engage stakeholders and provides only a superficial level of transparency in relation to a limited set of company activities. Others have argued that stakeholder participation requires more than transparency, it involves a more *intimate* engagement with stakeholders (Roberts, 2003).

Over time more intense forms of engagement with stakeholders have been considered within the social accounting literature (Owen et al., 2000, 2001; O'Dwyer, 2001,2005). These include direct dialogue with participants and incorporating their objectives into management systems (Baker, 2010). Critical theorists have been inspired by Habermas and argue that stakeholder engagements should represent an 'ideal speech situation' (Unerman and Bennett, 2004; Gray et al., 1997).¹ This Habermasian ideal requires that a

¹ Baker's (2010) review of research in this area shows that regardless of whether Habermas is referred to explicitly the findings of many critical studies are framed in light of this Habermasian ideal.

society-wide representation of stakeholders is involved in the engagement process. Within this process stakeholders need to be empowered within the debate and agenda setting processes where the validity of each participant's claim can be assessed discursively and a moral norm can be agreed on (Baker, 2010, p. 853).

Accounting has two extra functions within these more direct forms of engagement. First, accounting documents and records the dialogue process as well as the final agenda agreed upon by participants. Second, accounting plays a crucial part of the institutionalisation or the installation of stakeholder concerns into the organisational agenda. The key role of accounting in this installation process is as part of a management control device that gives stakeholders assurance that their concerns are integrated within the company's more general strategic and operational management systems. The logic here is that if social responsibility becomes an established and systematic affair then stakeholders have assurance that their concerns will be indistinguishable from other business matters and treated with the same veracity that managers attribute to their main economic goals (Durden, 2008). Therefore the promise of stakeholder participation as raised in the accounting literature is that it closes the accountability loop between corporations and those affected by their actions.

Despite the democratising potential of stakeholder engagement in theory – in practice these engagements have largely failed (Ball et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2000, 2001; O'Dwyer, 2003; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). In a recent review of the effectiveness of stakeholder engagements Baker (2010, p. 851) argues that, while the stakeholder engagement literature retains a theoretical purity, in practice stakeholder engagement fails in three ways in terms of the Habermasian democratic ideal:

The first is a restriction of the diversity of stakeholders within engagement processes. The second is the controlled nature of communication within engagement...The third and final element is a failure to operationalise the outcomes of engagement.

Many have argued that the ideal speech situation is an impossibly demanding proposal for practice in terms of time and organisational resources (Benhabib, 1990) and thus it is doomed to fail. Even Habermas has more recently said his earlier work is "too idealist" (Habermas, 1998, p. 244). In addition, Baker (2010) argues that these ideals are

problematic from a psychological point of view, where each individual sees other individuals as manipulative, strategic and poor representatives of outside social and environmental issues. This could stem from the fact that leaders of NGOs and other stakeholder organisations are no more democratically justified in their positions than managers are in theirs (Rugman, 2000). Moreover, Flyvberg, (1998) argues that the process of neutralising the power within any democratic process is paradoxically itself an imposition of power and a form of power abuse. These philosophical problems with the Habermasian ideal have the potential to rob it of its practical usefulness and therefore of its 'truthfulness'. It is important then for scholars and practitioners alike to move beyond this impasse.

A more pragmatic and less critical approach to improving the accountability of organisations could be informed by the later work of Habermas (1998) and the idea of *deliberative democracy*. Instead of positioning organisations at the centre of accountability demands and forcing them to open up to idealistic forms of stakeholder scrutiny, deliberative democracy sees corporations as already embedded in a broader political process (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). Here the focus of analysis is shifted to the design of broader political engagement where the principles of democracy are achieved by "making the routines of bargaining, campaigning, voting and other important political activities more public spirited in both process and outcome" (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 56). Additionally, while the ideal speech situation demands a consensus amongst participants, within deliberative democracy it is more important to find a rational basis for a (more likely) disagreement (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). The application of the concept of deliberative democracy to stakeholder engagement does not involve the neutralisation or destruction of the dominant economic agenda of management and shareholders but instead the circumscription of the agenda through practical methods of engagement (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007).

In a deliberative democracy stakeholder interests are not artificially imposed through idealistic internal governance structures but instead remain largely external to the corporation. As political actors, stakeholders can affect business performance through their influence on market conditions as well as by damaging corporate reputation (Zadek, 2007). Zadek (2007) identifies three methods available to stakeholders in which they can confront the corporate community and influence their decision making. The first is through

the development of very public information campaign. An example of this is Greenpeace's video campaign against Nestle, which was sourcing palm oil from the Orang-Utan inhabited rainforest. The second approach is less confrontational and involves private engagement that leverages the competencies and knowledge of both parties in a joint venture. Here both NGO and company collaboratively create solutions to social and environmental problems. The establishment of new organisations, like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), have come about due to environmental issues such as overfishing or deforestation. These bodies define clear rules and practices for more sustainable forestry, for example, and consult to, audit and certify forestry players. This has improved the market information available for customers about the source of their wood and paper products. Far from being a complete solution from a pragmatic perspective these projects and organisations can be assessed as successful as they address many social and environmental issues and have improved corporate practice. The third and final method involves making deals with corporations where a degree of legitimacy is exchanged for improved social and environmental performance. The ability of stakeholders to inflict costs on corporate performance through these methods allows them to impose demands on corporations, or involve them in a dialogue. An example of this approach is the Carrotmob's use of consumer activism, using "buycotts" (buying a lot of goods from one company in a small time period) to reward a company's socially responsible behaviour.²

Despite the claims of social accounting research that stakeholders are under-represented and marginalised in engagements there has been a rise in power of some NGOs and civil society organisations. NGOs have been described as sub-political organisations (Beck, 1992, p. 223) as they represent the growing willingness of individual and collective society actors to participate in anti-corporate activities (Matten and Crane, 2005). These organisations have become very powerful stakeholders with great influence in corporate affairs (for instance, NGO campaigns against corporations like Union Carbide, Nestle, Shell, McDonalds, Nike and Monsanto). Moreover, in global terms NGOs have increased in size and influence with the number of international NGOs increasing from 6,000 in 1990 to 40,000 in 2012. Likewise membership growth has been significant, particularly for

² A pragmatic approach to stakeholder participation will also search and allow for hybrid forms of interaction and collaboration with companies, such as either structured or ad-hoc forms of committees, projects or campaigns.

environmental NGOs (for instance the membership of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) grew from 570,000 in 1985, to 5 million in 2008 with donations of € 525 million in 2010). Research suggests that the actions of NGOs have a strong influence on voter polls and the views of consumers, employees and the public in general (Zadek, 2007). More recently Wikileaks has entered the stage as a very powerful NGO and has represented a more extreme form of deliberative democracy. Wikileaks' success in creating accountability did not follow the prescriptions of the Habermasian ideal speech situation in which firms are encouraged to share their information with stakeholders. Wikileaks instead relied on the exposure of unethical operations by companies and governments, which in turn forced organisations into a dialogue about their actions.

Without pragmatism we risk a permanent impasse where the practical realities of stakeholder engagement never live up to the ideal speech situation. While critical theorists look to the achievement of ideal speech situations, pragmatists may look to deliberative democracy as a way of encouraging constant improvement and transformation of institutional accountability (Fung, 2005). Based on these conceptual developments one can see that the pragmatic approach of deliberative democracy allows for a more workable framework for assessing the ways stakeholders can engage and affect corporations in relation to their interests.

4.2 A pragmatic alternative to the ideal of perfect transparency

Possibly the most visible use of environmental and social accounting information has been in the form of external social reports. These reports represent the main source of information for what is known about the social and environmental performance of companies and have been used to disseminate information in much the same way as traditional financial reporting. While these reports have been around for 30 years (Gray, 1992) they only began to be more widely used in the early 1990s as a response to the Rio Earth Summit and have been called a variety of names such as 'triple bottom line reports' (Elkington, 1997) and 'sustainability reports' (GRI, 2006). Since then there has been a steady increase in the number of companies producing these publications (KPMG, 2008). Accounting information within these social reports has focused on measuring corporate performance in a number of social and environmental areas that are arguably of interest to

external stakeholders. Increasing demand for this information has led to the development of a number of associated supporting mechanisms, such as reporting standards and assurance services aimed at improving the comparability and reliability of these reports (Gray et al., 1996; Schaltegger, 1997). The most influential of these reporting standards include the Global Reporting Initiative and AccountAbility AA1000. When taken together social reporting, standards and the associated assurance services are modelled on financial reporting with its associated international accounting standards and financial auditing.

A number of questions have been raised as to whether these social reports reflect actual social and environmental performance. While some researchers argue that social disclosures signal firm performance (Clarkson et al., 2008), others posit that these disclosures are used as a tool for legitimacy, that is, a tool primarily aimed at improving corporate reputation within society (Cho and Patten, 2007). The latter suggests that these reports do not actually reflect social and environmental performance and instead those companies with poor social performance provide positive off-setting disclosures in their reports (Gray et al., 1995; Milne and Patten, 2002). Others have argued that as well as being inaccurate these reports lack completeness and have little or no coverage of negative social and environmental impacts (Adams, 2004). Thus rather than being a medium for accountability, accounting and social reporting have instead been used to manipulate the perception of stakeholders so as to reduce the likelihood that these parties will make costly demands on companies. This literature has also been concerned with the under-specified and captured nature of discourse within social reporting and the way different words like 'sustainability' have become synonymous with managerial attempts to produce limited win-win solutions (Livesey and Kearins, 2002; Milne et al., 2006). Other studies have found that the content of social reports provide little specific and important information to relevant stakeholders (Adams, 2004; Beder, 2002; Gray, 2001, 2006, 2010) and instead are used to advance the political interests of companies, for example, reducing regulation and taxation through creating associations between their current business activities and sustainable development (Livesey and Kearins, 2002). Lastly social reports have ignored a growing body of scientific evidence about environmental and social problems and downplayed these problems (Bebbington, 2001; Spence and Gray, 2008).

This area of social accounting research has expended much effort in studying the transparency and accuracy of individual reports and constructs a picture of reality where managers control external communication and the perception of stakeholders through social reporting. In doing so social reporting disclosures and processes become devices that secure economic survival and legitimacy for organisations within society instead of improving transparency and accountability.

The issue, however, is that by focusing on transparency this research upholds the assumption that transparency is the equivalent of accountability (Roberts, 2009) and that transparency by itself is enough to guide and motivate stakeholders to push for radical change. Such a view relies on the (perhaps ironically) positivist assumption that individuals are rational information processors. It is a view that sees transparency as the missing link between rational, motivated and competent actors on the one side and radical change, social equity and environmental justice on the other. However, while transparency informs change it is impotent when alone. Wikileaks, which has been described as the only truly radical vessel of transparency (Zizek, 2011), is an example of this. . It is the embodiment of social accounting research ideals in the way it seeks to reveal and expose the unethical behaviour of companies and governments thereby allowing the public to hold them to account. However, Wikileaks has by itself produced little in the way of radical change (Reid-Henry, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, not only is transparency alone insufficient to produce change, but as Roberts (2009) argues, it is a potentially deceptive idea. While transparency poses as a potent counterbalance to corporate power through its ability to reveal and expose, corporations have reacted to this increased visibility by a preoccupation with defending themselves against the negative accusations that arise from being made transparent. While transparency in theory promotes openness, visibility and information sharing, in practice it paradoxically motivates separateness as well as a defensive and strategic use of information.

Another issue worth investigating is the somewhat idealistic assumption that social reports are a politically neutral domain for dialogue (see Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). Critically oriented social accounting researchers are endlessly disappointed to find that these reports are one-sided, strategic and politically weighted. Where a critical approach sees the strategic nature of social reports as being *captured* and thus not representative of the 'truth' a pragmatic approach sees the strategic nature of social reporting as part of the

way it enables truth. For pragmatists communication is only ever *strategic*; this does not preclude it from having 'truth' (Weick, 1995). Understandably managers celebrate a particular view in their social reports, a view that sees their role as suppliers of vital goods and services for society's material needs - this is a genuine ethical contribution and managers are right to celebrate it. They argue that the production of social and environmental costs is a by-product of the greater good they create. Too much is pinned on the rather impossible ideal of transparency in which managers and companies become non-strategic and expose all the negative aspects of their business's operations even those to their detriment.

In focusing on transparency social accounting research has placed too much importance on the production of social reports, which have been treated as if they were the only form of information about social and environmental issues. Social reports are one of many sources of information about social and environmental issues, which include both traditional and new forms of news media. Other sources of media about social and environmental issues have supplemented the lack of information provided by corporations and thus have not diminished the general awareness of the public. For instance, a comprehensive study of the public perception of global warming across a variety of western countries found that, despite the low levels of corporate transparency during the 1990s, there is a 'solid awareness' of, and support for, general environmental goals (Bord et al., 1998). However, while there was concern for global warming the western public only supported global climate change initiatives that would not impose unusual hardship on their lifestyles. The impediment to change here is not a lack of knowledge or transparency about climate change but a combination of limited willingness to make personal sacrifices and limited knowledge of potential win-win solutions to better cope with global warming. Perhaps then the point of inertia in change is not the availability of environmental information or transparency but the interpretation and evaluation of this information.

Introducing interpretation and sensemaking

Perhaps then the biggest goal of transparency is to reveal the truth. The hope within social accounting research is that 'the truth' about the world is eventually realised through accounting. Ideally corporations are forced to use their external reports to show that the present mode of organising, politicking and consuming in western capitalism is destructive to the very thing supporting our existence - the natural environment. Both critical theorists

and, ironically, positivists share the view that truth places us in harmony with the way the world *really is*. In contrast pragmatism sees truth not as something we can rely on - an external power bestowing its blessing upon us - but as “human actions in a potent phase” or inscriptions within the circle of human work (Koopman, 2006, p. 109). This means that representations (be they reports or accounts) are not ever able to reveal truth – truth instead is made in the process of linguistic mediation surrounding these and other representations. Thus instead, for Daft and Weick, it is the act of *interpretation* which is at the centre of communication. Interpretation is the process of translating events, developing models of understanding and conceptual schemes (Daft and Weick, 1984). Stakeholders and managers alike constantly make interpretations with the use of the notion of sustainability whereby “they wade into the ocean of events that surround the organization and actively try to make sense of them” (Daft and Weick, 1984, p. 286).

The difference between the view of truth in critical social accounting research and a pragmatic view of truth is the difference between seeing truth as waiting to be realised and seeing truth as enacted. It is also the difference between seeing the issues in the world as based on either uncertainty or equivocality. To date social accounting research has been primarily concerned with *uncertainty*, which is a problem of ignorance and insufficient information where more information about the ‘truth’ leads to less ignorance. This contrasts to the pragmatic view that problems contain *equivocality*, which relates to confusion rather than ignorance due to multiple conflicting and ambiguous sets of information available. For Weick and Order (1990) many highly complex global problems cannot be ‘resolved’ with outside data but instead require individuals to make collective sense of the problems through interpretations and by building a common perspective on the complex problems they face. Likewise, the role of organisations in relation to the natural environment is a question of equivocality as it relies on a complex combination of science which is then interpreted through many different events by a variety of different groups (Gephart, 1996; Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2006; Learmonth et al., 2011; Wiek et al., 2011). An example of an equivocal problem is the process of writing a research article or discussion piece (such as this one), which involves not only an analysis of a problem but also a re-interpretation of the existing literature so as to, as it were, set up the parameters of the problem.

Interpretation is necessary to deal with the equivocality inherent in the communication surrounding social and environmental issues. Weick (1995, 2009) refers to this process of interpretation as *sensemaking*. Sensemaking occurs when a flow of organisational circumstances are turned into written and spoken texts that serve as a media through which institutions shape conduct (Weick et al., 2005; see also Bartunek et al., 1999; Corvellec and Risberg, 2007). The pragmatic view here is one in which the organisation emerges through sensemaking, not one in which organisation precedes sensemaking; in Weick's words "situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (Weick et al., 2005). Organisations and stakeholders use sensemaking through equivocality and enact this sense back into the world so that the process of reporting is part of this sensemaking. Therefore, social reports do not tell us what to say about them – they are open to multiple interpretations. According to pragmatism social reporting does not have more or less ability to reveal a pre-existing truth about the world which is waiting to be exposed or discovered — but instead people have freedom to inter-subjectively create meaning from reports. This pragmatist view sees social reports not as potential exposers of the truth about corporate unsustainability but as facilitators to make sense of the equivocality that organisations and their stakeholders face in relation to complex social and environmental issues. This has a number of implications for current thinking in the social accounting project in terms of first moving from a production orientation to a use orientation of sustainability information, second, challenging the idea of capture and hegemony, and third, promoting experimentation over imagining. The following sections present the benefits of a more pragmatic approach to transparency.

From the production of truth to the enactment of meaning

The view of pragmatism offered above suggests that social reports are used by managers and stakeholders along with the other sources of media for producing meaning in relation to social and environmental issues. Under this view communication is not limited to the production of reports but also includes the interpretation of these reports. It is impossible for us as academics to interpret reports in the same way as stakeholders do; we are thus unfit proxies for understanding the interpretation of social reports. Studying the interpretation of reports by users in conjunction with the production of reports would reveal how reports enact truth for users and help them to deal with the equivocality involved in social and environmental problems. Research that looks at interpretation would also allow us to study reporting as part of the decision making process of stakeholders wherein we

can see reporting as a procedural input that precedes the decisions. This is an important concern of a deliberative democratic approach which starts with the assumption that the ethical and political legitimacy of decision making rests on the quality input information for interpretation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1998). Thus understanding the interpretation of sustainability is central to understanding the ability and motivation of stakeholders to participate in corporate agendas and enact change.

So far there has been scant research seeking to understand user interpretation. However, O'Dwyer et al. (2005) provide one such rare example. The authors survey how various NGOs interpret CSR reporting within Ireland and find that on average 90% of users found that reports could be improved and had insufficient disclosures. These findings generally support the current social accounting research story. However, the authors' use of statistical averages masked the existence of a range of responses and even contradictions within responses.³ Despite the strong negative sentiment and general dissatisfaction amongst NGOs with the level of reporting, 29% still found the reporting in some way useful. Even more interesting was that 89% of NGOs still wanted to work with the corporate sector to tackle social and environmental issues. These responses show a number of issues. First, stakeholders are heterogeneous in their interpretation of social reports and their usefulness.⁴ Second, the O'Dwyer et al. (2005) study challenges the common view of social accounting research that reporting is only *useful* when it reveals the 'truth' of corporate unsustainability. Despite the lack of disclosure about social impacts a large group (29%) of NGOs still found the reporting useful in its current form and an even larger group (89%) believed that reporting still had potential to be useful.

However, in terms of understanding the process of interpretation O'Dwyer et al. (2005) is constrained, as the questions used related to information certainty ("is there enough information") instead of understanding the equivocality issues faced by NGOs in their interpretation of reporting. Understanding the equivocality faced by users would involve asking questions along the lines of: which issues are most difficult to understand with the

³ The authors found that only 11% of NGOs agreed that reporting allowed them to monitor the companies' activities; also a minority (4%) of respondents either thought that reporting was credible or gave sufficient information about environmental and social impacts.

⁴ However, in terms of understanding stakeholder interpretation O'Dwyer et al. (2005) is methodologically limited. In-depth interviews would have revealed rich insights surrounding the process of interpretation. These interviews could have unpicked the seemingly contradictory responses of the survey and why it was that some respondents still wanted to engage with corporations despite the unsatisfactory nature of social reporting.

information provided by reports? What types of information would assist in this understanding? How would these forms of information motivate or change your participation with corporations? This would make for a richer understanding of social reporting interpretation.

Capture and evil managers

Capture or appropriation, as referred to in the social accounting literature, is a notion commonly applied to reporting and accounting processes when the truth about organisational reality, such as its unsustainability, is hidden or suppressed (Adams and Larrinaga-Gonzalez, 2007). More specifically, for our purposes, capture refers to a robbing of accounting and reports of their radical intent to expose the truth about organisational activities. Thus capture prevents stakeholders from holding managers and companies to account. In this way managerial capture as an idea is tightly coupled to critical notions of truth. If truth refers to an external and pre-existing *reality* then capture, as it has been used in the social accounting literature, refers to an intentional denial of truth. A logical corollary of this notion of truth is the idea that some agents support truth and some capture truth. Within the critical social accounting literature battle lines have been drawn between managers and shareholders as capturers and thus obstructions to this truth and non-economic stakeholders/NGOs/academics/environmental scientists who represent the repressed truth of corporate unsustainability.⁵

The risk here is that the world is cast in terms of good and evil. This dualism is emphasised in the more expressive social accounting articles, which recruit strongly emotive language when referring to evil corporations. The narrative presented by these authors is that corporations are populated by 'villains' who are determined to destroy the environment, where even well intentioned managers become constituted over time as shareholder maximisers due to corporate incentive structures (Gray, et al., 1997; O'Dwyer, 2003). Gray (2010, p. 57) is worth quoting here:

In the line-up of potential villains ... Capitalism and its destructive tendencies are manifest through its greatest creation – the

⁵ The view of corporate managers as *capturers of truth* is reflected in the use of the term 'corporate hegemony' within social accounting research when referring to the ability of corporations to dominate the construction of discursive formation and meanings within the political economy and the wider society (Levy and Egan, 2003; Milne et al., 2006; Spence, 2009).

corporation...the corporation achieves ... return through becoming a waste generating machine that thrives upon the ever expanding but increasingly fatuous consumption of wastefulness ... the lobbying and legitimising powers of the corporation are turned towards civil society and the state to ensure that any tendencies to rein in or hold corporations to account is, at best muted ...

As the agonists of critical narratives, corporate managers and their weapon (accounting) are responsible for the failure of achieving sustainability. Within these passages it is hard to avoid the negative caricature of corporations and their managers. It is perhaps this distrust of the corporation that motivates scholars to hold them to account.

But as Jonsson and Macintosh (1997, p. 376) argue, such rigid assumptions about the exploitative nature of capitalism, managers and companies create very predictable research questions and analysis where, as it were, “the cart always comes before the horse”. In social accounting research this means re-telling the same well-trodden narratives surrounding managers capturing accounting instead of staying open to other possible critical interpretations. Also, this negative view of corporations has an impact on the willingness of researchers to engage with managers and on what terms (Burritt and Schaltegger, 2010). Instead of including corporations in the change process, critical theorists want to force corporations to be accountable to their ideals. In monopolising the change process the social accounting project risks excluding a powerful party with enormous influence in achieving sustainable development. If we create adversarial relationships with corporations and ostracise them, we risk turning our back on a large source of knowledge and practical expertise that may contribute to the achievement of sustainability.

A critical approach, therefore, risks enacting the same stories and meaning of the process of reporting. In contrast, Weick (1979, p. 174) argues that there is a dynamic process between the individual and their context so that there is a variety of management responses in relation to the structural pressures they face within corporations. The act of producing social reports is an iterative one, involving the collection and presentation of data. The existence and availability of this information embeds new concepts surrounding sustainability into the organisational consciousness and improves the knowledge of staff

and managers in relation to their social performance (Alberda-Perez et. al., 2007). While enacting truth in this way risks creating an ethical narcissism amongst managers in relation to their performance (Baker and Roberts, 2011), it also develops a commitment to social and environmental performance (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2006).

Thus pragmatism encourages the use of other dimensions⁶ for assessing management action. To date, some research has been directed at understanding managers as individuals who interpret their context and try to enact change (Adams, 2004; O'Dwyer, 2003). These studies have found a variety of management responses in relation to balancing and interpreting pressures, such as the need to improve disclosures in order to meet information needs of stakeholders while reporting issues in ways that have economic and strategic value. Future work would do well to allow for an understanding of the heterogeneity within the responses and strategies of managers that are pursued when dealing with stakeholders (Clegg et al., 2011, p. 213)

From imaginings to experimentation

For social accounting scholars (e.g. Gray, 2002, 2010) *imaginings* or new forms of accounting innovations hold promise in providing a richer and more provocative understanding of the (un)sustainability of organisations. One example often held up as an *imagining* is the Jones' (1996) model, which measured the bio-diversity of regional areas and provided a basic inventory of flora, fauna, habitat, wilderness and other natural assets. Another venerated example is that of Lamberton (2000), who built a complete account of sustainability by monitoring all physical inputs and outputs and assessed progress in relation to these 'sustainability' targets. These *imaginings* Gray (2010) argues, overwhelmingly demonstrate the unsustainability of their case organisations. Here the notion of *imaginings* supports the critical view of truth as imaginings represent new ways of revealing the hidden truths about corporate unsustainability. The issue, however, is that these imaginings are another form of ideal that remains radical and pure but also aloof.

Pragmatists too are inspired by 'imaginings' and appreciate their ability to generate hope. However the key focus for pragmatists is on continued experimentation rather than imaginings. Experimentation for pragmatists is the study of the continuous application of

⁶ Weick uses the term "an equally rich assortment of possible punctuated variables" (1979, p. 174)

these new systems to new corporate situations. This approach has received much attention of late from sustainability scholars (York, 2009). While the critical approach hails a few ideal accounting systems that produce radical insights in a narrow set of circumstances, the process of continuous experimentation endeavours to connect the knowledge of researchers with the needs and challenges of those engaged in the practice of business (Hambrick, 1994; van de Ven, 2007). Such inquiry offers a genuine prospect for liberation and change precisely because it gives social accounting imaginings a clear sense of purpose (Wicks and Freeman, 1998). Here change comes about from both the playful exercise of seeing the world differently (imaginings) as well as seeing social accounting in ways that are enabling for individuals within organisations (Ahrens and Chapman, 1996). So, while imaginings are necessary to challenge conventional wisdom and posture “what if” questions, this needs to be tempered by the pragmatic commitment to find alternatives that will be used by practitioners and to open up new possibilities for human action (Rorty, 1989). Imaginings may prove to be an important starting point but researchers must shape their thought so that it can be operationalised in a specific organisation or situation and shape human activities in constructive ways (Donaldson, 1992). Thus, as pragmatists, we encourage future social accounting research to place as much emphasis on usefulness as on novelty. A concern with the practical must shape the spirit of experimentation.

Pragmatic experimentation is about the common problems that most businesses face. In functional terms, the continuous application of new ideas and systems also has the power to reveal a whole raft of unforeseen benefits and problems that arise in the everyday use of these systems. Through understanding the nuances of accounting in practice a pragmatic approach unveils more complex challenges to be considered in producing change (Richardson, 1997). In this way pragmatism sees the continuous and incremental pursuit of practical problems as a *path* to sustainability. Pragmatic engagement should not be based on just highlighting the bright and successful; rather it should accept and understand failures or deficiencies as further motivation to search for interesting new ideas and improvements.

5 Conclusion

This paper explores the pragmatic notion of truth within social accounting research. We start with an exploration of the notion of truth based on critical theory; a view of truth subscribed to by a stream of social accounting research. Truth here is the process of exposing the failures of our current society in relation to certain societal ideals, such as transparency and stakeholder democracy. These ideals seek to live in harmony with our universal essence; that we are dependent on the natural environment for our existence and quality of life. Thus the pursuit of truth, for social accounting research is achieved through the gathering of evidence that details how our current mode of organising, and more generally of capitalism, is dangerous to our own survival. In contrast to this pragmatism sees truth as a linguistically mediated outcome. Here truth is *made* in a continuous process of inter-subjective agreement. We make sense of the phenomena around us through developing models of interpretation, which we then use to enact truth in the world. This view of truth is less abstract and ideal-oriented, more focused on the process of interpretation and engagement surrounding specific problems.

This paper then takes issue with the key ideas developed in the social accounting literature surrounding the use of accounting to facilitate ideal corporate democracies and as a device to deliver transparency to its stakeholders. These ideas have roots in a view of truth inspired by critical theory and it is these foundations that we challenge with pragmatism. We argue first that the inspired notion that firms can achieve ideal speech situations with stakeholders is both practically inappropriate and philosophically problematic. We instead encourage the adoption of a pragmatically inspired deliberative model of stakeholder engagement. Instead of creating discursively pure engagements that are free of capture a deliberative approach encourages stakeholders to inflict external pressure through cleverly damaging corporate reputation, by exchanging legitimacy for improving social performance, or by forming joint projects with companies in a more educative capacity.

Second, we argue that transparency, as it has been conceived in social accounting research, relies on an external notion of truth, a truth that has great emancipatory potential if revealed. Under this view of truth, accounting is seen as part of a neutral transference of information. The pragmatic view of truth proposes an alternative in which truth is conceived as an outcome of linguistic exchange. Here accounting at best carries information but not truth. Truth is constituted through the interpretation of this information

or, as James (1995) would say, *truth happens* to accounting. Accounting then is part of a process of interpretation where stakeholders use accounting to both ‘make sense’ of and deal with the equivocality of the complex problem of sustainability. Focusing on interpretation changes our view of the role of accounting where we see it as part of an inter-subjective sensemaking process instead of as a vessel of truth. This in turn will promote a greater focus on the study of the interpretation of social reports by users; what is useful in reporting? What is trustworthy? Moreover, to challenge the view of *accounting as truth* also challenges the associated view that it can be ‘captured’ by management and other elites. Thus pragmatism challenges the view that the evil manager or corporate hegemony block the ‘truth’ and prevent a realisation of our environmentally destructive nature. Pragmatism here allows us to instead study the intention and sense-making of those individuals involved in the production process of reporting. We argue also that taking pragmatism seriously encourages a practical grounding of what has been called ‘new imaginings in accounting’. In order for these innovations to take hold in practice we argue that they need to be grounded in functional organisational reality.

It would be fair to mention at this stage that pragmatism has been subject to critique from various critical theorists, including Horkheimer. Horkheimer (Held, 1980) refers to the idea of ‘truth as enacted’ as a subjective notion of truth that is contained purely within a subjective reason (*Verstand*). Horkheimer argues that the instrumental and self-oriented nature of this subjective reason holds no appeal to any criteria of truth beyond probability, calculability and one’s own (subjective) success. In this way, subjective reason subverts more objective forms of reason (*Vernunft*) and acts as an apologia for pure self-interest and for the individualist tenets of free market capitalism. The subjective reason of pragmatism is also blind to larger ideological elements in operation within society. This is because pragmatism relies on linguistic mediation between individuals as a source of truth and understanding, whereas ideology exists as subconscious beliefs that structure our linguistic exchanges (Zizek, 1989). An example of this comes from the very kingdom of pragmatism (America according to Richard Rorty), when faced with the largest crisis of capitalism in recent memory— it not only failed to abandon its truly botched model of free market capitalism but strongly considered freer markets and less regulation as a solution to the crisis (Zizek, 2009). Here the pragmatic insistence of subjective reason subverted broader objective reasoning. This limitation of pragmatism supports a need for critical thinking within social accounting research, as it can provide a broader objective

commentary on the research field and question the general research approach as it is constituted by current socio-political, cultural and scientific thinking. In this way critical thinking is important to question whether the practical problems we seek to solve when being pragmatic are even the right questions to ask in the first place.

Pragmatism is an appropriate complement to the great thinking and work of critical social accounting research. However, to take pragmatism seriously is to challenge this research at its core; its notion of truth and its understanding of accounting as truth's transmitter. This paper has argued that a shift to pragmatism can expand the research field through providing a less restrictive view of stakeholder engagement and seeing accounting as part of the process of sensemaking. Nevertheless, being pragmatic is not enough, the critical tenets of social accounting research are still necessary to provide a broader commentary as to the direction of the field within its socio-political and ideological context.

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