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Agroscope

Can governance help to avoid greenwashing in LCA?

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Greenwashing

- **Greenwashing** is a form of spin in which green PR or green marketing is **deceptively** used to promote the perception that an organization's aims and policies are environmentally friendly. Whether it is to **increase profits** or **gain political support**, greenwashing may be used to **manipulate popular opinion** to **support otherwise questionable aims**.

Source: Wikipedia

- **Greenwashing is**
 - **Intellectual dishonesty**
 - **For a sensible profit**
- **Special context of LCA research**
 - **Claimed intellectual honesty** of LCA research communication
 - **Not (only) a question of legal behaviour, but also (above all) of credibility**



The six greenwashing sins

- Sin of the **Hidden Trade-off**, committed by suggesting a product is "green" based on an unreasonably narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues.
- Sin of **No Proof**, committed by an environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification.
- Sin of **Vagueness**, committed by every claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.
- Sin of **Irrelevance**, committed by making an environmental claim that may be truthful but it is unimportant or helpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.
- Sin of **Lesser of Two Evils**, committed by claims that may be true within the product category, but that risk distracting consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.
- Sin of **Fibbing**, the least frequent Sin, is committed by making environmental claims that are simply false

Source: Wikipedia resp. <http://sinsofgreenwashing.org/index.html>

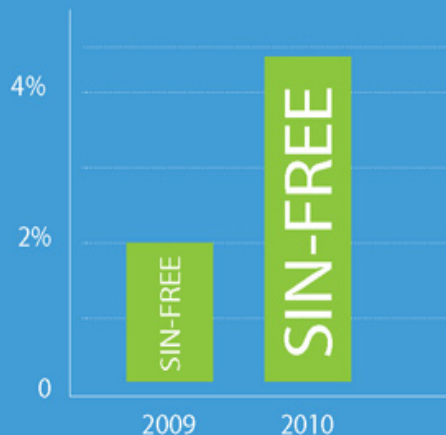


How “holy” are we?

- According to *sins of greenwashing*



More than **95%** of consumer products CLAIMING to be green were found to commit **AT LEAST ONE** of the “Sins of Greenwashing”.



4.5% of products examined were found to be “SIN-FREE”, compared to only 2% in 2009.

Does “commit” LCA research sins of greenwashing in its communication?

- Sin of the **Hidden Trade-off**
 - Restricted mid-point approach, carbon footprint, leaving out of the pesticide/water issue.
- Sin of **No Proof**
 - No correct access to data, system process vs. unit process
- Sin of **Vagueness**
 - See how the systems are defined/named, how the conclusions are drawn ... trends versus significant differences
- Sin of **Irrelevance**
 - Extreme scenarios/assumptions; sensitivity analysis focusing on issues without great relevance for the conclusion
- Sin of **Lesser of Two Evils**
 - Scope of the study: Meat LCA without a vegetarian scenario
- Sin of **fibbing**
 - Doubts for LCA studies issuing from countries without freedom of speech



Analysis

- In the most cases, LCA research **commits** “sins of greenwashing” without knowing it respectively gives itself “**absolution**” according to the principle “an LCA study with little greenwashing is better than no LCA study at all”
 - It is not first a question of intellectual dishonesty, but rather of **underestimating the proper responsibility** in a context where LCA gains in importance in environmental communication
- => Strong need of reflecting our practice in this respect**



Governance against green washing: The formal frame: the review (1)

- Very useful for “**amateur**” greenwashing
- Limited impact against “**professional**” greenwashing
- It is always possible to commit “sins of greenwashing” by respecting the norms (limits of the system, functional unit, allocation, data quality etc.)
- It is always possible to put forward a pretended **lack of knowledge** and/or of **budget** forcing to commit “sins of greenwashing” by erring through ignorance
- At the end, it is always a fundamental **human right** to have another opinion than the reviewer and to impute him hidden greenwashing intentions

Governance against green washing: The formal frame: the review (2)

- **Challenges of the review**
 - **Independence** of the review
 - Towards the reviewed
 - Towards the own interests of the reviewer
 - **Efficiency of the system**
 - Costs / amount of the work / recognition of the work done
 - **Limitations**
 - For **small projects**: up to 50% of the budget
 - Is it well-invested money?
 - For **great projects**: high complexity of the process
 - Is it worth to delay the publication of the results up to one year or perhaps more?

Governance against green washing: The social frame: the consortium (1)

- **Consortiums of competitors**
 - Composed of partners with the **same profile** related to the questions to be addressed (research institutions, companies of one sector ...)
 - Principle of **emulation** (exampleecoinvent)
- **Consortium of antagonists**
 - Composed of partners having functional antagonisms related to the questions to be addressed (like research/industry; plant/animal producers)
 - Principle of **surveillance** (example ÖB-CHInt)
- **Combined consortium of competitors and antagonists**
 - (example Agri-BALYSE)

Governance against green washing: The social frame: the consortium (2)

- Advantages:
 - Great **diminution of the risk** of committing the “sins of greenwashing ”through forced – although unsaid – treatment of the issue during the whole project
- Risks
 - Consortium of competitors: **Cartel**
 - Consortium of antagonist: **Arrangement**
- Disadvantages
 - **Very complex governance** (lot of bodies etc.)
 - Risks of **paralysis** (veto etc.) or **crisis** (majority votes etc.)
 - We are still experimenting the “good” social governance



Conclusions

- **Green Washing**
 - is multifaceted (the “**six sins of greenwashing**”)
 - **Concerns everybody** (not trivial not to commit one of “sins of greenwashing”)
 - **Governance rules in order to avoid greenwashing**
 - Formal frame (**review**) is necessary but has its limits and is not sufficient
 - Social frame (**consortium of competitors/antagonists**)
 - Useful against greenwashing
 - But very complex with risks of paralysis

Yes, governance can help, but we are still experimenring ...