

## **Counter-narratives in accounting research: a methodological perspective**

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### **Abstract**

In this chapter, we approach the theme of counter-narratives from the perspective of accounting. In the accounting literature, the term counter-account is used to refer to accounts, reports and other information produced by actors outside a given organization or industry. We begin our chapter with a short introduction to the basic notion of “account” and the principles of accounting as a practice. After this backdrop, we continue to introduce and define counter-accounts, and to explain how they have been studied in the accounting literature. Subsequently, we discuss counter-accounts from two different methodological perspectives, counter-accounts as a research method and counter-accounts as a research topic. At end of our chapter, we present two main conclusions. First, in a field as technical and specialized as accounting, academics are in a position to undertake social science that matters by compiling counter-accounts either by themselves or in collaboration with social movements or NGOs. Second, counter-accounts produced by activists provide fertile ground for academic analyses from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. Given the vast sustainability challenges societies are facing, it is highly relevant for scholars to understand and engage with the various types of counter-accounts, which challenge the hegemonic narratives and vested interests defending the status quo as well as promoting inaction over issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, human rights breaches and the undermining of democracy.

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we approach the theme of counter-narratives from the perspective of accounting. More specifically, we discuss a phenomenon known in the accounting literature as counter-accounts (Vinnari & Laine, 2017; Denedo et al., 2017), which can be seen as a subtype of counter-narratives (Bamberg and Andrews, 2004; Frandsen, Kuhn and Lundholt, 2017). Often defined as “accounting for the other, by the other” (Dey, Russell and Thomson, 2011, p. 64), counter-accounts refer to accounts, reports and other information produced by actors outside a given organization or industry. Our purpose is to consider counter-accounts from a dual methodological perspective. First, we illustrate how counter-accounts can be compiled by researchers seeking to advance a social cause. Second, we consider counter-accounts as an activist methodology, which can then be studied by researchers with the aid of various theories and methodological approaches. It is noteworthy that the empirical examples we have chosen to include in this chapter constitute only a narrow selection of the broad variety of forms under which counter-accounts can appear.

As with any scholarly paper, we maintain that it is essential for the reader to have some understanding of the context from which a paper and the arguments presented therein derive. Further, we acknowledge that the presumed audience of this chapter is likely to reside outside the accounting discipline, or even outside the broader field of management and organization studies. Therefore, we consider it necessary to begin our discussion with a primer on accounting and the key concept of “account”. It is useful for the reader to know that organizations produce a variety of accounts, some mandatory, others voluntary, some standardized, others entirely free of form. We

do not intend to provide an exhaustive explanation, nor to claim that counter-accounts and the associated literature could not be understood and drawn on by non-accountants, but that such knowledge is useful in seeking to make sense of the argumentation, logics and research settings that appear within the accounting literature on counter-accounts.

The chapter proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief discussion of accounting and the associated academic literature. Next, we delve into counter-accounts, providing an overview of the concept and the ways in which it has been studied. Our subsequent discussion of counter-accounts from a methodological perspective provides illustrative examples of the two ways in which counter-accounts have been respectively produced and studied by scholars. Discussion and conclusions end the chapter.

### **Accounting and accounts: a brief introduction**

Accounting refers to a range of organizational activities that focus on measuring, assessing, processing and communicating financial and non-financial information (e.g. Hopwood and Miller, 1994). While both the traditional emphasis and the current core of accounting have to do with financial information, the relevance of various types of non-financial information for accounting and accountants is steadily increasing, not least because of the growing significance of social and environmental issues for both societies and individual organizations (Unerman and Chapman, 2014). Below we elaborate how organizations can produce not only mandatory accounts but also voluntary ones, the best examples of the latter being sustainability reports.

Accounting is oftentimes divided into two main areas, known as management accounting and financial accounting. The former focuses on calculative activities taking place inside an organization, such as budgeting, cost accounting and investment appraisals. While many management accounting practices are institutionalized, widely spread and shared across global organizations, they are in principle not regulated. This is in contrast to the second area, financial accounting, which concerns the information processed and reported to an organization's external audiences. Financial statements and the bookkeeping practices underlying them are highly regulated, with the intention of having organizations produce and communicate comparable information to those interested in using it. The most prevalent user group is investors, but the information is also relevant for various other groups, such as regulators, other organizations and the organizations' own management.

While there have been considerable efforts to harmonise accounting standards on the international level, particularly through the development of International Financial Accounting Standards (IASB), there are still substantial differences between jurisdictions such as the US, European Union, China and India (Camfferman and Zeff, 2018). It is also relevant to acknowledge that financial accounting requirements vary according to the type of organization, with small businesses differing from large listed entities, and public sector organizations from private ones and NGOs. At the same time, it is worth noting the other end of the spectrum, the various secrecy jurisdictions, which not only impose very few regulatory requirements for resident organizations, but also stipulate that those organizations do not need to disclose any information to external parties (Shaxson, 2011). Such opportunities enable the creation of complex organizational structures, for instance the establishment of holding companies in jurisdictions with appropriate legislation to avoid taxes in other places, to limit the possibilities of interested parties to obtain information about the activities

or ownership of a particular organization, or all of these simultaneously. We will return to this theme in more detail below, as this phenomenon relates closely to counter-accounts.

In addition to the mandatory financial disclosures, many organizations, especially multinational corporations and large locally listed companies, publish other types of reports on a voluntary basis. A prominent example is sustainability reports, which have developed into a standard feature of organizational landscape during the last decades. Despite some minor regulatory requirements set in recent years, such as the European Union directive on non-financial disclosures (Johansen, 2016), sustainability reporting remains a predominantly voluntary activity. This implies that organizations have major control over what they decide to disclose, how they do it, which issues they emphasise, as well as which aspects they decide to remain silent on. This continues to engender scepticism as organizations have continuously been noted to use their sustainability disclosures for impression management by, for instance, avoiding controversial topics, bolstering the significance of minor improvements, or seeking to construct new narratives of themselves as green organizations or pioneering trailblazers (Cho et al., 2015). Even though many organizations seek to increase the credibility of their sustainability disclosures by having an independent third party provide assurance on the information, this might not produce the intended effect as sustainability assurance is also a voluntary and unregulated activity, and the assurance providers operate largely under the discretion of the organization's management. As such, many NGOs and civil society actors do not find organizational sustainability reports very informative or credible, and have over the years produced competing interpretations of organizational activities, namely counter-accounts<sup>1</sup>.

## **Counter-accounts**

Counter-accounts can be seen as a subset of counter-narratives, although the two concepts have not, at least to our knowledge, appeared together in prior studies. In the accounting literature, scholars have defined counter-accounts as “accounting for the other, by the other” (Dey et al. 2011, p. 64).<sup>2</sup> Most often, counter-accounts have been discussed in the context of (adverse) social and environmental impacts of organizational activities: as organizations' own sustainability disclosures have been noted to be largely self-serving and biased, counter-accounts produced and published by groups beyond organizational control have been considered as a possible alternative source of information, which could help societal groups make more informed evaluations and decisions of the organization (Tregidga, 2017).

As highlighted by Bamberg and Andrews (2004, p. x), “counter narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that they are countering”. Within the broader social science discussion, counter-narratives are understood as alternative storylines used by actors to position themselves, the context they are in, or a wider phenomenon to present a narrative that counters a dominant cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Like many other disciplines, accounting has competing schools of thought. The adherents of the dominant paradigm draw mostly on economics, subscribe to a post-positivist epistemology and apply quantitative methods to large datasets of capital market information. In contrast, a smaller school of interpretive and critical scholars sees accounting as a social and institutional practice, and draws on a variety of social scientific theories to study the role and implications of accounting and accounting practices in societies. The concept counter-account originates from a subset of this interpretive/critical research, namely social and environmental accounting (SEA) research. SEA scholars examine how accounting, accounting practices and the associated disclosures are related to the social and environmental impacts of organizations, as well as the implications these practices have for the broader sustainability issues in society.

<sup>2</sup> While the term counter-account was introduced rather recently, it is worth noting that similar phenomena have also been examined earlier (see Medawar, 1976; Harte & Owen, 1987; Gray, 1997; Cooper et al., 2005).

narrative, or masterplot. Andrews (2004) notes that counter-narratives make visible how a dominant narrative could be told in a different way, that the masterplot might not be the only way the story could be told. In this sense, individuals or groups can use counter-narratives, for instance, to make sense of their own lives or experiences, which seemingly do not fit the dominant normative storyline (see Andrews, 2004, p. 3).

While counter-narratives feature in all spheres of life, the discussion regarding how they can appear in the context of organizations is more closely related to counter accounts. Lundholt et al. (2018), referring to Boje (2001) and Kuhn (2008), describe counter-narratives as those “narrative processes and stories which offer differing interpretations of organizational realities than those constituted by dominant (Boje, 2001) or authoritative (Kuhn, 2008) narratives”. Here, Lundholt and colleagues (2018, p. 4-5) highlight how in organizational contexts counter-narratives can have a variety of relations to the dominant storylines and emphasise that while counter-narratives can at times be oppositional and in conflict with the masterplot, they can also assume a more dialogic and parallel position in relation to the main narrative. Moreover, in an organizational context one can identify several different narratives, in which the dominant and counter-narratives weave into one another through intertextuality.

Within the literature on counter-accounts, the focus is most often on an alternative account of organizational activities produced by an actor outside the range of organizational control. Instead of a broader narrative, the storyline being countered is an organizational account. Now, what an account consists of is obviously a debated question (Arrington and Francis, 1993). For some, accounts include only the formal disclosures published by an organization, such as annual reports, sustainability reports, press releases and corporate websites. For others, an account is a wider concept, including also anything communicated via an organization’s social media account, or uttered by their CEO in a press interview. In each case, accounts can be seen to consist of different types of qualitative or quantitative information released by an organization about its activities in general or in regard to some particular event, policy, or issue. Counter-accounts, then, are most of the time alternative narratives, which counter such an official organizational account. A counter-account can be directly opposed to one specific organizational report, such as a CSR report or an initiative regarding a particular social or environmental issue, or it can assume a broader scope by providing an alternative account of the organization’s activities, possibly juxtaposing it with the organization’s reports from a longer period of time (Thomson, Dey and Russell, 2015).

Counter-accounts have also been defined with reference to the core concepts of traditional accounting, namely information, users and decisions. While the purpose of conventional accounting is to provide investors and creditors with quantitative, predominantly financial, information about economic entities for the purposes of decision-making and assessing management’s accountability (Accounting Principles Board, 1970; International Accounting Standards Board, 2010), counter-accounts may contain also qualitative and non-financial information concerning entire industries or governance regimes, for a broad range of constituencies<sup>3</sup> who can utilize this information for making not only economic decisions but also moral and political ones (Vinnari & Laine, 2017).

Counter-accounts appear in various forms, such as one-off written reports, video material, or a longer-term campaign including a range of materials. Often cited examples from the early 2000s

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. suppliers, customers, employees, governments, non-governmental organizations and the public at large.

include the “Other Shell Report”, published by the Friends of the Earth as a response to Shell’s report “People, Planet and Profit”, and the “British American Tobacco: The Other Report to Society”, published by the Action on Smoking and Health as an alternative perspective on BAT’s social auditing initiative and associated disclosures. While similar types of accounts have been published also considerably earlier (e.g. the work of Social Audit Ltd., see Gray et al., 1996; Medawar, 1976), it seems that counter-accounts have gained more prominence in the past two decades, possibly in part due to improved access to information and easier communication available through the internet and more recently the social media. Overall, various types of counter-accounts are now clearly a part of social movements’ toolkits throughout the world.

An early paper on such alternative accounts is Dey (2003), which distinguished between silent accounts, i.e. accounts created from the information produced and disclosed by the organization itself, and shadow accounts, those produced by using information collected from sources outside and beyond the control of the organization (see Gray, 1997). While silent accounts allow presenting the organization in a different light without needing to collect any competing information, shadow accounts provide the opportunity to shed light on possible gaps as well as misrepresentations in the organization’s disclosures. Sometimes creating a silent account by using only the information provided by the focal organization can aid those willing to challenge the entity in creating a more convincing case, as the organization under scrutiny cannot simply attempt to dismiss the source material as unreliable and biased. Continuing on this theme, Dey, Russell and Thomson (2011) examined the potential of shadow accounts in problematising the institutional conduct of organizations or broader social institutions. Using examples from the accounting literature (e.g. Harte and Owen, 1987; Adams, 2004; Cooper et al., 2005), Dey et al. (2011, p. 71) argue that in order to “promote emancipatory social change” and enhance organizational accountabilities, shadow accounts need to facilitate dialogue and debate, identify alternative courses of action, and also create space and opportunities for change. While neither Dey (2003) nor Dey et al. (2011) use the term counter-account, the phenomena of silent and shadow accounts clearly fall under the broader umbrella of counter-accounts.

We will next turn to a more detailed discussion of counter-accounts as a methodology, dividing our argument in two parts. First, we will discuss the counter-accounts produced by scholars. We claim that this is a particularly relevant theme for accounting scholarship, given the complexity of the accounting practice and the expertise it requires to master the intricacy of the accounting craft. Accounting scholars can use their expertise not only in choosing their research topics, but also in producing and presenting alternative accounts of some perceived problematic organizational or institutional practices. Second, we highlight how the question of counter-accounts’ methodology is in fact double-layered, as not only the various NGOs and social movements use counter-accounts in their campaigning work, but also the scholars investigating such counter-accounting will resort to particular theoretical and methodological approaches in their research. As emphasized earlier, our illustrative examples are only a narrow selection of the broad variety of forms that counter-accounts can take.

### **Counter-accounts as a research methodology**

One of the areas requiring specific expertise within the domain of accounting is taxation. A recurring storyline in the 2000s has been the various types of tax avoidance schemes employed by major multinational companies. While journalists have done a commendable job in trying to explain the

complexities of the phenomenon and the details of particular cases to the public (e.g. Obermayer and Obermaier, 2016; Barstow, Craig and Buettner, 2018), the relationships between taxation, accounting and international regulation require considerable expertise from anyone willing to understand the details. Combined with most multinationals' pledges of corporate social responsibility and profiling themselves as good corporate citizens, the field of corporate tax avoidance offers those possessing sufficient expertise ample opportunities to engage in counter-accounting.

Even though any larger corporation is usually perceived to be a single entity, virtually all such companies are in fact corporate groups consisting of a parent company and a vast number of subsidiaries, in other words separate organizations varying in size, form and purpose. Given that a substantial portion of the world trade currently takes place between these parent companies and subsidiaries (Ylönen and Teivainen, 2018), and that such intra-firm trade has a significant role in various tax planning and avoidance mechanisms organizations use, it is oftentimes relevant to unpack an organization's financial situation by getting deeper into its accounts. A corporate group's consolidated financial statements, which are included in the annual report, present the group's aggregate financial figures. Despite the plentiful information provided in such consolidated accounts, the aggregation by definition also implies that many details are lost in the process. Therefore, to understand the setting and financial transactions between parent company and subsidiaries, the researcher often needs to gain access to the financial statements of the various subsidiaries. Producing such accounts on an annual basis is mandatory, and in a number of jurisdictions anyone can gain access to these via the local trade registry. Likewise, further information on companies' and their subsidiaries' activities and financial transactions can be obtained through other public registers, such as trade statistics on imports and exports, and customs statistics. Using a combination of various types of records from a long period of time makes it possible for the researcher to produce an alternative account of a tax-avoiding organization and its activities.

A recent example of this is the study by Finér and Ylönen (2017), who conduct a multiple case study of the tax avoidance schemes used by two Canadian mining companies in three of their mines located in Finland. Given that the authors' investigation is based on publicly available data, they can use their knowledge of taxation to publicly problematize the conduct of particular organizations, to make visible elements of current arrangements not otherwise brought to public attention, and also to challenge the existing public governance system, which allows organizations to use legislative loopholes for private gains. Methodologically, Finér and Ylönen (2017) emphasise that the discussion of such complicated organizational structures is only possible via in-depth case studies requiring considerable expertise, as the nuances of the arrangements get lost in the aggregated databases. Finér and Ylönen (2017) also point out that such an investigation is made considerably more challenging and is at times limited altogether by companies' use of secrecy jurisdictions, in which the financial records published by companies resident to the jurisdiction are not made publicly available.

Another somewhat similar analysis is undertaken by Ylönen and Laine (2015), who present a case study of transfer pricing arrangements used by a major Finnish pulp and paper company in its internal pulp trade. Like Finér and Ylönen (2017) above, Ylönen and Laine (2015) base their analysis on a wide range of publicly available data sources, such as subsidiaries' financial statements accessed via trade registers, corporate annual reports, interim reports and press releases, as well as

data on imports and exports accessed through customs databases. These are then utilized to present a counter-account of how the organization utilized a small Dutch subsidiary in its internal pulp trade to gain considerable tax benefits, and to discuss how the company had remained silent of the arrangement for years, simultaneously emphasising its commitment to accurate and transparent communication, to the highest ethical principles, and to being a role model willing to engage in an open dialogue with its stakeholders. It is nonetheless worth noting that in neither of the cases mentioned above do the authors claim that the conduct of the organizations in question would be illegal. Instead, the authors argue that it is important to display such alternative accounts in the public domain to make previously invisible structures visible and to democratize information by making intricate financial accounts more accessible also to those not possessing expertise in accounting and taxation (see also Sikka and Willmott, 2010; Ting, 2014).

These examples of researchers' counter-accounts on corporate taxation also relate to a broader discussion on the role of academics in societies. With the ever-escalating sustainability challenges facing contemporary societies, we remain adamant that scholars should use their position to engage in societal debates as public intellectuals, taking an active role in critically assessing and, if needed, challenging hegemonic political logics and taken-for-granted truths (see Tregidga, Milne & Kearins, 2018; Golsorkhi et al., 2009). The contemporary business world is a fruitful setting for such critique, as currently virtually all multinational corporations and industrial lobby groups advocate responsible business practices and claim to be at the forefront of sustainability. While we are sympathetic to such efforts and encourage corporations to take swift action, in general we remain sceptical of much of the discourses of business sustainability, social good and shared value creation, as despite the beautiful talk and overflowing commitments the major global sustainability trends show no substantial sign of change (see Steffen et al., 2015; IPCC, 2018). As such, we maintain that scholars with accounting expertise are needed to explicate the prevailing business logic and corporate communication to individuals and groups lacking such knowledge but possessing other characteristics and resources needed to take societal action. Moreover, while our examples relate to taxation, we are by no means saying that the role of scholars should be limited to this particular theme; similar counter-accounts are needed across the realm of sustainability.

### **Counter-accounts as a research topic**

In addition to producing their own counter-accounts, researchers have also studied the counter-accounts compiled by social movement activists or NGOs on behalf of some oppressed group or the natural environment. Scholars have sought to add knowledge on counter-accounts with investigations from a range of theoretical perspectives, with varying datasets and methodological approaches. Counter-accounts have often been conducted as single-case studies by contrasting the information provided in an organization's or industry's formal accounts with the counter-account produced by an external actor (see Adams, 2004). Such a setting has then been used in attempts to tease out nuances of organizational activities, the characteristics of counter-accounts and the identities of the groups producing them, the role and relevance of counter-accounts in contemporary societies, as well as the possibilities of counter-accounts to facilitate a transition towards a more democratic society (e.g. Apostol, 2015; Laine & Vinnari, 2017; O'Sullivan & O'Dwyer, 2009; Tregidga, 2017; Vinnari & Laine, 2017).

Here we will present two examples of research on counter-accounts, deliberately chosen to be as different as possible. The first example focuses on Finnish animal rights activists' use of counter-

accounts in their campaign against the meat and dairy industry. Our second example concerns international NGOs' use of counter-accounts in campaigning against major oil companies in the Niger Delta.

Vinnari and Laine (2017; see also Laine and Vinnari, 2017) analyze the counter-accounts produced by Finnish animal rights activists on behalf of farmed animals. In practice, these accounts consist of secretly filmed video clips from animal farms that have been uploaded on dedicated websites and occasionally shown on national television. Vinnari and Laine (2017) employ the analytics of mediation (Chouliaraki, 2006), a form of critical discourse analysis, in their examination of the activist videos as displayed on the website and a television news programme. The aim of their study is to shed light on the ways in which the visual counter-accounts might evoke the spectators' sympathy towards the suffering animals and encourage them to take practical action. The authors find that counter-accounts can give rise to different ethical discourses and practical engagement options depending on how they are visually and verbally framed, and whether they are displayed on the activist website or embedded in the news programme. Laine and Vinnari (2017) in turn apply the concepts of discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1996, 2001, 2005) in their analysis of interview data and documentary material related to the release of the activist videos. Focusing on the potential effects generated by the counter-accounts, the authors note how the dominant social groups attempted to divert attention from the atrocities of animal production by representing the activists as irresponsible, militant and negligent. Making a methodological point that is also of broader relevance, Laine and Vinnari (2017) highlight the difficulty of trying to identify the societal effects of a particular counter-account and thus establish whether it can be deemed effective.

Our second example is set in an oil-rich developing nation with glaring power differentials between marginalized communities and corporations. Denedo et al. (2017, 2019) undertake a single-case study of how international advocacy NGOs have used counter-accounts to combat corruption, environmental degradation, poverty and human rights violations associated with oil production in the Niger Delta. Having begun already in the 1990s, the conflict has assumed diverse forms from peaceful protests to violent struggles with several lives lost, and involved numerous advocacy NGOs, transnational actors, oil companies and the Nigerian government. In their analysis, the authors apply the conflict arena framework (Thomson et al., 2015) to examine interview data and a wide range of counter-accounts, including tangible reports, legal actions, documentaries, petitions, YouTube videos, protests, and blog entries. They find that the NGOs employed different types of counter-accounts at different stages of the protracted conflict, depending on the context. The NGO representatives interviewed found the counter-accounts useful for giving visibility and voice to underprivileged indigenous groups; helping those communities build capacity to more effectively defend their rights; and for delegitimizing and reforming problematic governance and accountability mechanisms. However, making a point similar to Laine and Vinnari (2017), the authors note that a snapshot view of NGOs' current satisfaction does not guarantee that counter-accounts have succeeded in permanently improving the situation in the Niger Delta due to the dynamic nature of the conflict.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have discussed counter-accounts as one sub-type of counter-narratives. We began with a short introduction to the basic notion of "account" and the principles of accounting as



a practice. We then provided a definition of counter-accounts and explained how they have been studied in the accounting literature. Finally, we discussed counter-accounts from two different methodological perspectives, counter-accounts as a research method and counter-accounts as a research topic. Based on this discussion, we can draw two main conclusions. First, in a field as technical and specialized as accounting, academics are in a position to undertake social science that matters (Flyvbjerg, 2001) by compiling counter-accounts either by themselves or in collaboration with social movements or NGOs. Second, counter-accounts produced by activists provide fertile ground for academic analyses from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. Such examinations also enable scholars with an emancipatory intent to flag questionable or downright despicable corporate practices, although more indirectly. As the sustainability challenges societies are facing loom ever larger, we argue that it is highly relevant for scholars to understand and engage with the various types of counter-accounts, which challenge the hegemonic narratives and vested interests defending the status quo as well as promoting inaction over issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, human rights breaches and the undermining of democracy.

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