

Power to the individual

A case study of a Dutch NGO and its strategy to fight plastic pollution

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Abstract

The impact of plastic on the environment has been acknowledged on different levels, among others various NGOs around the world. These NGOs are known to aim for a reduction of plastic ending up in nature and more specifically the ocean. Plastic has been instrumental to the development of modern societies since the 1950s as the properties of the material enables it to be used for various purposes. This dependency on plastic demonstrates the need for social change in order to reduce the amount of plastic entering the ocean. Therefore, it is crucial for NGOs to adopt a strategy that supports social change. Since NGOs are likely to perceive individuals as the agent of change, identifying how individuals can contribute to social change and how NGOs can encourage this, can be relevant in the fight against plastic pollution. In this thesis a Dutch NGO's strategy and the execution of this strategy is analysed through semi-structured interviews and textual social media posts. The analysis has been guided by the theoretical concepts of hegemony and different forms of power. It has demonstrated the NGO's awareness of the structural connotations of plastic pollution. Nevertheless, their strategy shows a strong focus on changes within the private sphere and a strategy relying on education and creating awareness. The former can be recognized as the reinforcement of the hegemonic discourse on individualized responsibility, preventing plastic manufacturers and companies to be forced to act. The latter indicates a lack of understanding of the structural challenges that individuals face in avoiding plastic. The discussion includes the acknowledgement that changes within the private sphere are necessary. However, rather focusing on these changes alone, a recommendation is given to introduce alternative approaches for individuals to create social change.

Keywords: The Netherlands, plastic pollution, social change, individual behavioural change, hegemony, power

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Where to even start? Everyone that I have crossed paths with in my life has made it possible for me to be here. Here, a place where I learned more about what is happening in the world and what has to be done. Here, a place where I met people I now love and will miss as soon as I leave. Here, a place where I realized even more how important family is.

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1. Introduction

It is hard to grasp how much plastic has been produced and used in the last few decades. Geyer, Jambeck, and Law (2017) calculated this amount to be 8,3 million tonnes in total in 2015, of which only 30 percent was in use. The remaining 70 percent is being recycled, incinerated, but most of all dumped at landfills (Geyer et al., 2017). According to Jambeck et al. (2015) 4,8 to 12,7 million tonnes of plastic has entered the ocean in 2010, based on among other population size, and the efficiency and quality of waste management. The real amount of plastic entering the ocean will never be measured as most plastic 'disappears' in the oceans, degrading into small particles or sinking to the bottom of the ocean (Buranyi, 2019). As plastic is known to affect marine life (Derraik, 2002; Gall & Thompson, 2015; Gregory, 2009) and research on human effects is still on-going (Barboza, Vethaak, Lavorante, Lundebye, & Guilhermino, 2018; Seltenrich, 2015; Shen, Huang, et al., 2020; Worm, Lotze, Jubinville, Wilcox, & Jambeck, 2017), many individuals, organisations and institutions do their best to tackle plastic pollution. For example, the United Nations has recognized the urgency and included the reduction of marine pollution as one the targets of the sustainable development goals (United Nations, n.d.). Haward (2018) and Jia, Evans, and Linden (2019) however acknowledge the need for action on all levels.

By the Ocean we Unite (BTOWU) is a Dutch non-governmental organisation (NGO), which aims to eliminate plastic pollution by activating individuals through sailing expeditions, citizen science projects and educational programs. The organisation was founded in 2016 by five passionate individuals, who after the successful first sailing expedition to Norway, decided to continue using their passion to fight plastic pollution. Kandziora et al. (2019) propose that to lessen or even eliminate plastic pollution social change is necessary. This organisation will be used as a case study to understand the strategies used by NGOs to help make that change in society. In order to play a supportive and essential role in the fight against plastic pollution, it can be useful for an NGO to be aware of the social aspects of the problem of plastic pollution.

“‘[T]heories of change’ specifying the working understanding of the problem being addressed and how the programme[’s] actions are expected to resolve it” (McGee, 2020, p. 58) are often missing in aid-funded accountability programmes. The efficacy of the work done by NGOs might be undermined when a theory of change is missing within NGOs’ strategies as well. A possible lack of theory of change within a strategy is necessary to be identified in order to improve the fight against plastic pollution. This thesis will therefore study the vision and strategy of BTOWU in regard to their perception of how society can be changed.

1.1 Focus and aim

In light of the harmful consequences of plastic pollution that will be discussed in Chapter 2, the need to effectively address this global problem is great. Ultimately, NGOs with an aim to reduce plastic pollution recognize and address the real underlying cause of plastic pollution: “the broader societal systems and habits that make plastic ubiquitous” (Pahl, Wyles, & Thompson, 2017, p. 697). NGOs’ position within society gives them the opportunity to contribute to the social change necessary for reducing the problem of plastic pollution (McSweeney, 2014). Yet, this position also permits NGOs to adopt an approach that is detrimental for achieving social change (McSweeney, 2014; Pearce, 2006). Therefore, an awareness on how social change is achieved is vital for an NGO to have an impact. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to an improvement of NGO’s role in society to address and overcome these underlying causes. This is done by gaining an understanding of how an NGO perceives its strategy and the actual execution of this strategy, through the concepts of power and hegemony. The research questions of this thesis will thus be as follows:

RQ1. What is the strategy used by non-governmental organisations to reduce plastic pollution?

RQ2. How can the concept of power and hegemony contribute to non-governmental organisations’ aim to reduce plastic pollution?

The questions will be answered through the analysis of the case that has been introduced in the previous section. A qualitative content analysis will be carried out on interviews with board members of BTOWU, posts on social media and the website of the organisation. The first research question is the primary one addressed through the analysis of the material collected, as the material will offer insights into the strategy that is currently being applied by the organisation. Accordingly, answering this first question to identify the strategy is quintessential to answering the second question. This question will consider the possibilities for an NGO to improve their approach in order to achieve social change (Pahl et al., 2017).

1.2 Relevance for sustainability science

Sustainability science is known to look at problems and use interdisciplinarity as a way of more successfully solving this problem (Jerneck et al., 2011; Spangenberg, 2011). This should be the same for plastic pollution, as it is considered a wicked problem that “cannot be solved within the context of a single discipline” (Belontz et al., 2019, p. 855). The role NGOs play in addressing social problems is essential to consider in sustainability science. Cash et al. (2003) emphasize the need to understand how issues are framed instead of solely identifying the actions that are taken to tackle these issues. Studying the NGOs perception of the problem and its strategy to tackle it, is therefore of relevance to and can contribute to sustainability science.

1.3 Outline of the paper

The paper has started with an introductory section that will be followed by a description of the impacts of plastic and the role of Dutch NGOs fighting these impacts. A more detailed description of the case will be given in this chapter as well. Chapter 3 will discuss the used methods, followed by Chapter 4 presenting the theoretical concepts of power and hegemony that will be used to interpret the data. In the chapters thereafter the collected data will be discussed as followed: Chapter 5 will contain a description of the data, while Chapter 6 will include the analysis of the data. Chapter 7 will provide the answers to the research questions and the implications of it, after which a conclusion will be presented in Chapter 8.

2. Plastic pollution and Dutch non-governmental organisations

This chapter will give a brief literature review on the impacts of plastic pollution. It will describe the role of Dutch NGOs and their fight against plastic pollution, after which a more in-depth description of the case will be given.

2.1 The different impacts of plastic pollution

Plastic as it is commonly known today has been produced massively since the 1950s (Thompson, 2015). The different forms of plastic are now used for extensive purposes (Andrady & Neal, 2009) depending on their various properties. Those properties give plastic its durability, low costs, and lightweight, which can also explain the increase of plastic production and consumption over time (Derraik, 2002). As previously mentioned in the introduction, 70 percent of all plastic ever produced has been recycled, incinerated or has ended up in landfills or in the environment. Geyer et al. (2017) calculated the distribution of these options based on plastic production, product lifetime, and the recycling, incineration and discard rates from different regions in the world. The results indicate that from all the waste that has been produced nine percent has been recycled and 12 percent has been incinerated, which leaves 79 percent to be discarded at landfills or in the environment.

Although many NGOs seem to focus on the impacts of plastic pollution in the ocean (e.g. Greenpeace, n.d.; Kneefel, n.d.), it is important not to ignore that the production and disposal of plastic contributes to global warming. This is partly due to the incineration of plastic. Hamilton et al. (2019) expects the 12 percent of plastic that is being incinerated to increase dramatically. As a result, they project annual greenhouse gas emissions of 2,8 gigatons in 2050, which is detrimental in a period in which carbon emissions should reach net zero if we want to stay below 1.5 degrees global warming by 2100 (IPCC, 2018). Moreover, according to the report released by Hamilton et al. (2019), the refinery of plastic is “among the most greenhouse gas-intensive industries in the manufacturing sector—and the fastest growing”. An impact of plastic pollution specifically is the reduction of the

ocean's ability to store carbon due to the presence of microplastics in oceans (Shen, Ye, et al., 2020), resulting in higher levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

With an increasing amount of plastic entering the ocean (Ostle et al., 2019), concerns about the health risks for humans are rising as well (Barboza et al., 2018; Seltenrich, 2015; Shen, Huang, et al., 2020; Worm et al., 2017). Most scholars do however acknowledge the lack of evidence about the effects on humans (Barboza et al., 2018; Seltenrich, 2015; Worm et al., 2017). Nevertheless, they emphasize the need for research given the potential implications of the issue (Barboza et al., 2018; Seltenrich, 2015; Shen, Huang, et al., 2020; Worm et al., 2017). Additionally, this relates to the recommendations made to investigate the effects of microplastics on soil ecosystems, as humans and other organisms, are dependent on the quality of soil for their existence (Chae & An, 2018).

The reason most NGOs focus predominantly on the impacts of plastic pollution on marine life might be because these impacts are widely researched. In contrast to the risks for humans, the consequences of plastic pollution on marine life are evidently harmful, in the form of entanglement (Derraik, 2002; Gall & Thompson, 2015; Gregory, 2009), ingestion (Derraik, 2002; Gall & Thompson, 2015; Gregory, 2009) and possibly the transfer of toxins when ingested (Rodrigues, Duarte, Santos-Echeandía, & Rocha-Santos, 2019).

To conclude, the impacts of plastic and plastic pollution are abundant and possibly greater than what is known today. Efforts made by NGOs to reduce these impacts should therefore be appreciated. In the subsequent section I will discuss why and how Dutch NGOs hope to do this.

2.2 The role of NGOs in the fight against plastic pollution

In the Netherlands, the terms non-profit organisation (NPO) and non-governmental organisation are not perceived as different because of their characteristics. According to the Chamber of Commerce and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, NGOs are non-profit organisations that direct their efforts towards improving the situation of the environment, poverty or human rights (KVK & Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, n.d.). Van der Ploeg (2005) uses the same categorization in his paper on the legal frameworks of NPOs in The Netherlands: "When I talk about non-profit organisations I mean: non-governmental organisations with a purpose in the general interest, recognized as a legal category" (p. 62). NGOs and NPOs both engage with the government, but are classified as non-governmental (Lang, 2013; van der Ploeg, 2005). Additionally, both NGOs and NPOs are most often run solely by volunteers and aim to contribute to the common good (Lang, 2013; van der Ploeg, 2005). Accordingly, the term NGO that is used throughout this thesis could be substituted by the term NPO without changing the implications for Dutch organisations.

Despite the fact that The Netherlands has improved its waste management over the last three decades (e.g. landfilling is uncommon (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, n.d.) and litter is cleared up by municipalities and regional water authorities (Snijder & Nusselder, 2019)), many Dutch organisations are dedicated to reducing plastic pollution. The global scale of the problem may explain their justification to still address the problem to individuals in the Netherlands. Besides, a report released by CE Delft, a Dutch independent research and advisory agency, demonstrated various issues with the present Dutch waste management (Snijder & Nusselder, 2019). These issues include lack of transparency about plastic waste generated by companies, the construction, agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors, the industry, trade, services, and the government (Snijder & Nusselder, 2019). Additionally, recycling rates have been based on the amount of plastic that has been exported to be recycled, while it is uncertain whether this amount has truly been recycled (Snijder & Nusselder, 2019). This indicates the need to address the global problem of plastic pollution in The Netherlands as well.

Although there are several prominent Dutch initiatives and NGOs that address marine plastic pollution (e.g. By the Ocean we Unite, n.d.-b; Grondstofjutters, n.d.; *Het Zero Waste Project*, n.d.; Plastic Soup Foundation, n.d.; Plastic Soup Surfer, n.d.; The Great Bubble Barrier, n.d.; The Ocean Clean Up, n.d.; The Plastic Whale, n.d.), they do not utilize the same approach. Whereas the majority focus on how individuals can help, The Ocean Clean Up and Great Bubble Barrier are notable for their emphasis on technology to address the problem. In the following section, BTOWU will be introduced in greater detail, as this organisation is one of the NGOs that emphasize the role individuals can play in fighting plastic pollution.

2.3 Introduction to the case study: By the Ocean we Unite

By the Ocean we Unite is a Dutch NGO, based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It was founded in 2016 by Thomas van Tiel, who after sailing the ocean for several days was appalled by the sight of a plastic bottle far away from where it had probably been used. Together with Karl Beerenfenger as expedition leader, he founded the organisation, forming a team of five with a filmmaker, a researcher and an administrator. With their passion for sailing and storytelling they hoped to inspire others to help resolve the problem of plastic in the ocean. The aspect of sailing makes them a unique organisation within the Netherlands, and well-known for their interdisciplinary approach of arts, research and public engagement (Belontz et al., 2019). Their first sailing expedition to Norway received attention from National Geographic (National Geographic, 2018), demonstrating their ability to reach an international audience.

Included in their sailing expeditions is a citizen science project, in which participants help research and identify microplastics in the water. This has led to an international network with universities, demonstrating their interdisciplinary approach, strong affinity with research and ambition to teach participants to think critically. Four years after their first sailing expedition they have expanded their activities and efforts to include documentary screenings, beach clean-ups, and lectures. The main social media channels used for public outreach are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. Because of their international network they have decided to communicate in English and Dutch, to broaden the audience they reach. Their website is a collection of the sailing expeditions and other activities BTOWU has organized, the research they have conducted, and recommendations on what individuals, collectives and organisations can do to tackle the problem of plastic pollution. Moreover, it introduces the volunteers that together work for BTOWU.

The Wheelhouse, AKA the management of BTOWU is currently composed of three people. Through holding weekly meetings and extending communication over email they are responsible for the organisation and its strategy, which in turn is executed by the majority of the volunteers. Volunteer roles range from social media management and juridical support to several marine biologists. During the interviews at their office in Amsterdam, the ambition to grow, develop and professionalize was apparent.

3. Methodology

For my methodological approach I have chosen to use qualitative research. Through qualitative research one is able to research a situation from the perspectives of the people involved (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). This enables the researcher to have an in-depth understanding of experiences, opinions and interpretations people have and make (Hennink et al., 2011). Despite many organizations informing policy based off a data-driven approach, quantitative research cannot provide an understanding of the subjective how and why an NGO perceives the problem of plastic pollution. Qualitative data gives me the opportunity to “interpret the meanings that participants themselves give to their views and experiences” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 17), making this form of data essential to answer the research questions.

I have chosen a case-based methodology to both explore an NGO’s strategy and to describe this strategy in relation to the theoretical concepts that will be explained in Chapter 4. Adopting a case-based methodology facilitates the development of a general understanding of how NGOs address the problem of plastic pollution, and how strategies can be improved.

3.1 Justification of case study

The previous chapter mentioned the varying approaches to plastic and the waste management in the Netherlands. From the plastic of which it is known how it is managed as waste, less than one percent is being landfilled (Snijder & Nusselder, 2019). As landfilling allows plastic waste to become litter (Sharma, Aloysius, & Visvanathan, 2020), such a low percentage indicates good waste management in The Netherlands. The Netherlands however exports a third of its plastic waste to other countries (Geurtsen, 2019; Statistics Netherlands, 2019), where waste might not be managed as it is in The Netherlands. Therefore, although the Netherlands is considered to creating little domestic plastic pollution, waste generated in the Netherlands can still contribute to the global problem of plastic pollution. Additionally, having little plastic pollution does not imply an absence of plastic pollution (Boonstra & Hougee, 2019; Lieverse & ter Beek, 2018). Therefore, limiting the scope to Dutch NGOs can be justified by the role the Netherlands plays in worsening the problem of plastic pollution. Additionally, having Dutch as my native language, limiting the potential cases to Dutch ones, made it possible for me to gather data using the language I feel most confident about. It also increases the credibility, because it enabled me to understand participants and their context more competently and thus more completely.

As I have been engaged with the issue of plastic pollution myself for the last five years, the process of finding a case was predominantly based on my knowledge on the active NGOs in the Netherlands. To gain an in-depth understanding of an NGO's strategy I have chosen to adopt a single-case study, in which the case resembles other NGOs working in the same field. Although BTOWU is unique regarding the sailing experience they offer, they can be identified as an average case. The organisation organizes lectures, beach clean-ups and school programs in order to educate and activate, which are approaches that are present in other NGOs as well. This is based on descriptions of activities found on websites of active NGOs in the Netherlands. The findings and recommendations of this thesis will be limited to NGOs that express a focus on individuals and how individual's actions can help tackle the problem. In regard to the execution of a strategy, the case of BTOWU can be identified as an instrumental case, as it contributes to the understanding and improvement of other NGOs that approach the problem similarly (Stake, 1995).

3.2 Methods of data collection

To answer the research questions, my data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, and textual communication on social media and the website of BTOWU. The website has been used to gather a first impression of the organisation. Moreover, the content of the website has been used to support the analysis of the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were important to get an in-

depth understanding of the NGO's vision and strategy. Posts on social media and content on the organization's website illustrated BTOWU's execution of their strategy.

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews and choice of interviewees

In-depth interviews in the form of semi-structured interviews can be conducted to understand one's motivation for certain behaviour and its context (Hennink et al., 2011). Hence, to understand an NGO's perspective, interviews with volunteers of the organisation are necessary. Initially, the first interview was scheduled and arranged through email. Hennink et al. (2011) describe the gatekeeper strategy as approaching "people who have a prominent and recognized role" (p. 92) in order to recruit participants for interviews. This was most evident in the stage of recruitment, as my initial correspondent, the co-founder of BTOWU, agreed to allow board members to be interviewed, as well as providing me their references.

Ultimately, I ended up interviewing the three currently active board members of the organisation, of which none requested to be anonymized. These interviews took place on January 13th, 2020 in Amsterdam. Following my interview guide (Appendix 1), I set forth to identify BTOWU's strategy and justification through the perspectives of the individuals responsible for creating the strategy. Broad and general questions allowed the interviewees to guide the discussion and determine the topics being covered. This created the possibility to analyse what they perceive as important to the NGO rather than my understanding of what is important in their strategy (Barbour, 2011). The three interviews had a duration of approximately 60 minutes, 45 minutes, and 30 minutes. After the interviews, follow-up questions were asked through email. A summary of the follow-up questions that have been answered by one of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 2.

3.2.2 Textual communication on social media and the website

The interviews are meant to explore the desired strategy of BTOWU, while their website and posts on social media indicate the executed strategy. In other words, it shows the actual strategy of BTOWU that is experienced by external actors. The website has been used as mentioned before and has therefore been visited multiple times during the entire process of the familiarisation with and presentation of the case study, and the performance of analysis.

By The Ocean We Unite makes use of four different social media channels, being Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. During the interviews it became clear that the organisation is most active on Instagram and Facebook, which I was able to observe myself as well. Therefore, I decided to limit myself to those two media. On March 12th, 2020, the ten latest posts on Facebook and Instagram were downloaded and used for the content analysis. Social media can be used to analyse and compare offline and online behaviour of users that produce content (Zeller, 2018), which

explains why social media is used to answer the research questions. Additionally, text has the ability to reproduce the “existing social and power relations” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 93), making the texts along the social media posts relevant to analyse according to the theoretical concepts explained in Chapter 4.

I have considered including visual communication in my analysis, as images have the capability to communicate the social and power relations as well (Pahl et al., 2017). However, after reviewing the visual aspects of the posts I decided that its content would not add to the content analysis. Therefore, the images have not been analysed in the present research.

3.3 Analysis of collected data

The content of the collected data has been described and explored through qualitative content analysis. This is a research method that addresses “not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content” (Drisko & Maschi, 2016, p. 82). To find these themes and core ideas, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. To limit my influence on the content of the interviews, I decided to only translate quotes that are used in the thesis. After transcribing, I made myself familiar with the transcriptions by reading and listening to the interviews. A combination of deductive and inductive coding has been used, to identify the main categories in the data (Drisko & Maschi, 2016), which I have done manually by printing the interviews on paper and colouring those passages that could be identified as belonging to the main categories. Before starting the analysis, I organized the highlighted passages by colour. The main categories will be introduced before elaborating on them in Chapters 5 to 7.

3.4 Limitations

Although the collected data turned out to be sufficient to answer the first research question, a limitation could be the lack of data in the form of observations of activities by BTOWU. This was my initial and preferred method of researching the execution of the organisation’s strategy. Unfortunately, in the first email conversations it became clear that during the months of ascribed fieldwork no activities were planned, limiting the data collection to interviews and online communication with external actors. Secondly, follow-up questions for the interviewees that have not been answered (Appendix 3) could have given more in-depth understandings and possibly different findings. Finally, as the interviewees suggested, I contacted them after analysis to ask for an interview with the social media manager. Due to schedule conflicts, they were unable to be interviewed. This is a limitation as this could have provided further insights into the decisions made for the content of social media posts.

4. Theoretical background

In the introduction it has been mentioned that the environmental problems could be identified as a social problem as well. It is therefore essential for NGOs to approach them as such and question the power relations within these problems (McGee, 2020). For this, a Gramscian approach can be helpful to recognize existing dominant views on the responsibility for environmental problems and to adjust strategies accordingly.

4.1 The concept of power and hegemony

There are various views on who is responsible for environmental problems, and thus who is responsible for plastic pollution in the ocean. Steven Lukes, a political and social theorist, explains that this view is dependent on power. The influence of power can be recognized in the decisions that are made, as well as the decisions that are not made. Lukes adds a third view on power to analyse power comprehensively (Lukes, 2005) and elaborate on who can be held responsible (McGee, 2020). This third view can be described as the invisible power, the other two respectively the visible and the hidden power (VeneKlasen, 2020). The visible power is better to understand as formal power and includes the legislations and formal policies informed by a court or a board full of members (Lukes, 2005; VeneKlasen, 2020). The hidden power relates to who sets the agenda, and which decisions inform what is being discussed and thus what not (Lukes, 2005; VeneKlasen, 2020). The invisible power describes how power can influence, shape and determine what one perceives as wants or needs (Lukes, 2005). It is the normalisation of certain behaviour, norms and values in society (VeneKlasen, 2020), and making one accept the status quo (Pettit, 2020). These powers can determine the dominant discourse or ideology. Throughout this thesis a discourse or ideology refers to how reality is presented, and to how one thinks the world works (Storey, 2015).

In particular, the concept of invisible power can be associated with the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Ideological hegemony is the domination and intellectual and moral leadership of the ruling class over subordinate groups (Gramsci, 1971). This domination and leadership is not done through force and coercion, but foremost through consent of the subordinate groups. In contrast to Marx, Gramsci believed that power of the ruling class is maintained by more than their economic status or ownership over the means of production; it is through the presence of their ideology in civil society that the ruling class maintains its power (Berberoglu, 2017a; Gramsci, 1971; Kurtz, 2001; Marx & Engels, 1970).

Although the dominant discourse predominantly represents the interests of the ruling class, compromises are made to make the subordinate groups believe it is in their own interest. The ruling class promotes this through media, political, economic, educational, and religious institutions. It

persuades subordinate groups to accept the social, cultural and moral values imposed by the ruling class (Berberoglu, 2017a; Kurtz, 2001). The ruling class is successful when subordinate groups have a false consciousness of what is good for them (Berberoglu, 2017a; Gramsci, 1971; Kurtz, 2001). Rather than false consciousness, Gramsci chooses to use the word common sense. Kurtz explains that the use of false consciousness assumes that one is manipulated and victimized. Another assumption would be that one gives consent for things that are not in favour of their own well-being (Kurtz, 2001). The use of the term common sense avoids these assumptions, as it considers that not all consensus are “always [the] result from fully conscious free choices based on rational calculations” (Kurtz, 2001, p. 6646). Accordingly, the ruling class sustains the hegemony through consent, although if necessary, with force and coercion.

Intuitively one might think that force can provoke reluctance to the dominant discourse, but the ruling class attempts to “ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 69). Moreover, the ruling class makes sure their interests are not infringed upon by the compromises made (Gramsci, 1971). In other words, the interests of the ruling class, although representing a minority of society, will always be prioritized over the subordinate groups as much as possible. Again, this is made possible through the presence of the ideas of the ruling class in media and various institutions (Gramsci, 1971). This leads to one giving consent based on one’s common sense or knowledge that is manufactured by those who want this consent: “[T]he State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 74).

Gramsci argued that the consent for how particular things in society are done is not solely maintained through formal institutions and regulations (Gramsci, 1971). Civil society reproduces this as well. NGOs, as part of civil society, should be aware of their role in possibly reproducing an unfavourable discourse in regard to the effort being made to reduce plastic pollution (McSweeney, 2014; Pearce, 2006). On the other hand, they can also resist a discourse detrimental to fighting plastic pollution and direct their focus on achieving systemic and structural changes (McSweeney, 2014). How a discourse can be changed and how NGOs can encourage individuals to contribute to this change will be discussed in the following section.

4.2 Social change

To overcome the hegemonic, dominant discourse it is necessary to present an alternative one. This alternative discourse is part of a counter hegemony that challenges the common sense established by the ruling class. In the case of a developed civil society like The Netherlands, Egan (2014) argues

that the counter hegemony arises from a *'war of position'*. A war of position means a transformation of the common sense and consciousness (Worth & Kuhling, 2004). Additionally, it is important to expose the weaknesses of the hegemonic discourse, hoping it will lead to withdrawal of consent from subordinate groups (Worth & Kuhling, 2004).

The dominant discourse is dependent on the invisible power as this power defines the norms, values and beliefs existing in society (VeneKlasen, 2020). Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, and Kalof (1999) recommend NGOs to reflect on their own values and beliefs on the problem. This helps NGOs to avoid reinforcing a common sense detrimental to social change. Additionally, they argue that the promotion of particular norms, values and beliefs will encourage individuals to perform one's role as citizen (Stern et al., 1999). As Maniates (2001) states: "It calls too for individuals to understand themselves as citizens in a participatory democracy first, working together to change broader policy and larger social institutions, and as consumers second" (p. 34).

Stern et al. (1999) describes ways an individual can practise both its role as citizen and consumer, to help achieve social change: public activism in the form of participating in demonstrations and engage actively in social movements organisations; "low-commitment active citizenship" (p. 82) which are political actions that pose less risks such as communicating one's discontentment through letters to politicians, signing petitions and supporting movement organisations financially; "support and acceptance of public policies that may require material sacrifice in order to achieve the movement's goals" (p. 82) of which a good example is the ban on plastic bags in The Netherlands which reduced the purchase of plastic bags with 70 percent (Government of The Netherlands, n.d.); and the last one is individual behavioural change within the private sphere. According to Stern et al. (1999) all forms are necessary to achieve social change.

On the one hand, the use of the concept of power and hegemony in the analysis will give insights into the extent to which the NGO is contributing to the reproduction of the ideology of the ruling class. On the other hand, the theoretical framework of how social change can be achieved will give insights into whether the NGO is strengthening this process.

5. Results

In Chapter 2, BTOWU has been introduced as a young organisation full of energy to educate individuals and encourage them to think critically about the problem of plastic pollution and the solutions they offer. With the dream to have an ocean without plastic, BTOWU actually strives for social change (Kandziora et al., 2019). The organisation's website and posts on social media, and interviews with the board members of BTOWU have been analysed, of which its main categories are

as followed: the role of the individual, the role of companies, the role of the government, and more specifically behavioural change, education, information and awareness, biospheric motivation, and the recognition of power dimensions. Most of those have been coded inductively, only the latter has been coded deductively. This chapter will summarize and describe these themes.

5.1 By the Ocean we Unite and their vision

On BTOWU's website, the organisation's vision is described as followed:

"Our vision is a world where no plastic ends up in nature anymore. A world with healthy oceans and animals (including ourselves) where we, as humans, collectively protect that where we came from: our oceans." (By the Ocean we Unite, n.d.-c)

Although this description is broad, as one of the interviewees acknowledged, the use of specific words indicate how BTOWU perceives the problem of and solutions to plastic pollution. The first sentence indicates that plastic should not end up in the ocean. In the interviews and in the emails following those interviews it has become clear that this vision is based on the current situation. The ideal situation would be a world in which plastic is not even perceived as a material that can be used, according to one of the interviewees. Two of the interviewees indicate the role of plastic in the development and existence of society as important. They suggest circular design and more efficient recycling as stepping stones towards this ideal situation, in which producers must take on that responsibility.

Secondly, BTOWU emphasizes in their vision the necessity to act collectively. In the interviews, protecting collectively seems to refer foremost to the idea that every individual must act:

"But who has to solve these problems, then is the answer, we all need to do this. All of us can contribute, to a greater or lesser extent." (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

"Everyone thinks they are just a small drop, but a lot of drops make a large pond." (Interviewee 2, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

"We do not offer the solution, and there is also not one solution and we cannot point at each other, because everyone has to do this." (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

The role BTOWU wants to play in achieving their own vision is an educational and inspirational one:

“But what our mission actually is, is to take people along with our story, our passion and our interests to show them what is going on. And that the problem definitely lies with us as well, that we, in that way, make people want to change their behaviour, because they realize ‘oh, we are also part of the problem’.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

“What we want to achieve is that there, that people will be informed by us in such a way, or will have an experience with us, by sailing with us, that through this, behavioural change will happen.” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

The reason they focus on the behavioural change of individuals can be explained by their perspective on the problem:

“We, as an organisation, decided to dedicate ourselves to positive and constructive ways to change. To change the system we thus focus on individuals, but with the bigger system in mind.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 6, 2020)

According to interviewee 1, it is the bigger system that creates the problem of plastic pollution:

“No, not per se, the problem lies within the system. The individuals work in that system, so if indeed, you approach it from a philosophical perspective, I would say that the system was created wrongly.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

“So, in that perspective, I see the system as the problem and that we all work within that system. That applies to companies, that applies to individuals, but it certainly applies to politicians and political parties.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

Their vision and views influence their approach with which they aim to change this system, which will be described in section 5.2. This section will demonstrate that they aim to educate and activate “really just the whole world” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, January 13, 2020) and prefer not to specify their agents of change:

“We find it important to approach the whole system, and as soon as you make a choice like, we will only focus on individuals, or we will only focus on companies, you will limit yourself very much. At least! You could limit yourself quickly in how you approach the problem and that is something we find a very difficult issue. How we actually see it, we focus on individuals, but always within companies and within politics.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

In short, BTOWU intends to reduce plastic pollution by educating and activating the individual, as they perceive individuals as the agents of change. The following paragraphs will discuss how BTOWU uses different approaches to reach this agent of change.

5.2 By the Ocean we Unite and their approach

In the previous section it has become clear that BTOWU views individuals and their actions as a way to change the system. They hope to achieve this by focusing on education and activation: “We organize (sailing) expeditions to conduct scientific research, increase public awareness and activate people, organisations and governments to change their usage of #plastic” (By the Ocean we Unite, n.d.-a)

5.2.1 *Sailing expeditions as biospheric motivators*

These sailing expeditions have given BTOWU a unique asset in inspiring and motivating individuals to act on the problem of plastic pollution:

“We do that on board of a sailing ship, so you are close to the water, that people, the landlubbers get a bit of a feeling of movement, a bit uncomfortable sometimes, a bit unsettled, but in that way you can touch them deeply with such a story and then you immediately show the beauty of the Wadden Sea and the Dutch lakes.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

During the sailing expeditions participants work together on the ship to make it sail and help conduct research on microplastics. Additionally, the time, calmness, and space to discuss the problem thoroughly with each other is mentioned as one of the advantages of being on a boat together for a longer period of time. The few expeditions BTOWU has been able to organize since 2016 are described as successes, particularly for their potential to increase the motivation to act.

5.2.2 *Information as the key to change*

On their sailing expeditions, but also during their other activities, BTOWU raises awareness and educates participants on the problem of plastic pollution and the solutions to it. It is often assumed that information is the key to changing individuals' behaviour and enhancing pro-environmental behaviour (Uzzell & Rätzl, 2009). These informational strategies have the aim to influence the motivation behind certain behaviour and steer individuals towards the desired behaviour (Steg & Vlek, 2009).

“Yes, that is what we believe [that we tackle the problem that way]. That when you know what the consequence is and how you can change things yourself, how you can have influence on the bigger process..” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

“So the problem is that we just do not know very well what exactly.. How the plastic soup arises precisely, to which we all contribute ... Thus, people have to be informed.” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

“That people have to know and then is it for me, personally, you can point at companies, you can point at governments, you can point at consumers, you and me who throw shit on the streets, but personally, in my opinion, if there are enough people with enough knowledge, then automatically things will change at important places. So. That. Information.” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

By the Ocean we Unite uses this strategy evidently on Instagram, where they encourage individuals to educate themselves on plastic pollution as well as coral bleaching for example.

5.2.3 Activating actors to avoid plastic consumption

By the Ocean we Unite uses its activities, namely sailing expeditions, social media, lectures and other activities to educate, and through that, activate individuals to act on the problem of plastic pollution. As previously mentioned, they focus on individuals in general, but also on individuals more specifically within organisations, companies, and governments (Figure 1).

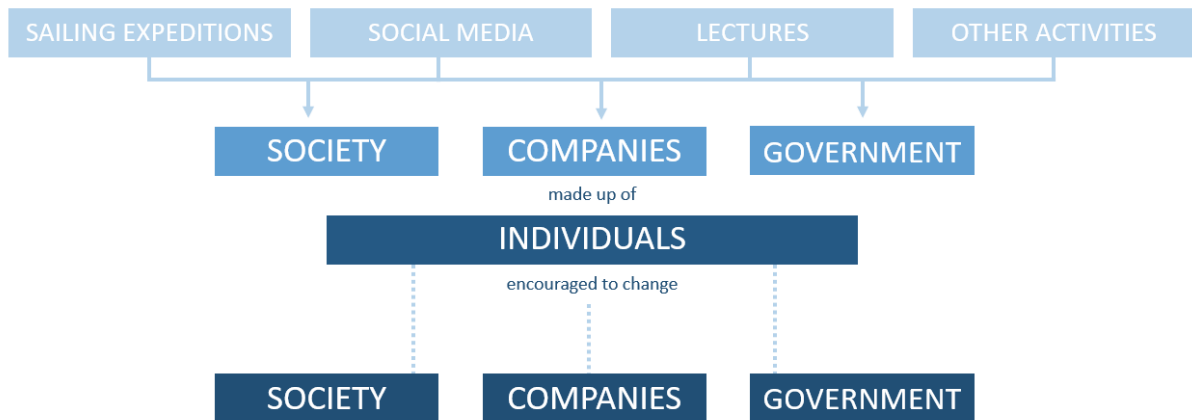


Figure 1. Diagram of By the Ocean we Unite's approach to tackle plastic pollution. By the Ocean we Unite organizes various activities in order to reach individuals, who in their role as citizen, employer, employee or civil servant are expected to use the gained knowledge to make changes within these institutions. Diagram created by author, 2020.

The previous paragraphs mention the aim to motivate individuals to take action. The website and social media demonstrate what BTOWU expects individuals to do, to make a difference. First of all, their web shop includes products that “use less plastic or replace plastic” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020), such as reusable bottles, natural sponges and plastic free cotton buds. These products reduces one’s plastic consumption, as reusable bottles avoid the necessity of future purchases of bottled water, and natural sponges and plastic free cotton buds reduce plastic

waste after use compared to their plastic version. Additionally, the website recommends individuals to for example use reusable bags, refuse straws, avoid flushing down band-aids and contact lenses, and reduce the purchases of clothing, towels and toys that are made of plastic materials.

The web shop and the recommendations on the website both demonstrate the encouragement to make changes in one's private sphere. Aside from using Facebook for their promotion of sailing expeditions and the search for funding, BTOWU uses this platform to encourage behavioural changes within the private sphere. Posts either motivate individuals to reduce one's plastic consumption by choosing alternatives (Figure 2) or to directly reduce plastic pollution by picking up trash (Figure 3 and 4). Their website shows they talk about different ways individuals could act during lectures at events (Figure 5).



Figure 2. Facebook post by By the Ocean we Unite on February 10, 2020. The post includes a question what to use to avoid the use of plastic pet waste bags. Retrieved March 12, 2020 from www.facebook.com/pg/BytheOceanweUnite/posts/

- English below

Tip van de week! Wintersport, zomervakantie, een weekend weg in het voorjaar.. Op reis gaan is ontzettend leuk. Helaas vergeten we soms onze duurzame visie mee te nemen op vakantie en dat is jammer. Onze tip van de week is dus om minimaal 1 duurzame activiteit te ondernemen op vakantie! Bijvoorbeeld Plastic Whale, Amsterdam verkennen op de grachten maar tegelijkertijd afval uit het water vissen. Een fantastische trip met een duurzaam randje!

Tip of the week! Snowboarding, summer holidays or a weekend trip in spring.. Taking a trip is loads of fun. Unfortunately, we tend to forget our sustainable visions at home. Our tip of the week is to attend at least 1 sustainable activity on your holiday. For example, Plastic Whale, explore Amsterdam on the canals but pick up trash along the way. An incredible trip with a sustainable twist!



Figure 3. Facebook post by By the Ocean we Unite on March 1, 2020. This post promotes the activity of plastic fishing offered by the organisation Plastic Whale as a sustainable activity. Retrieved March 12, 2020 from www.facebook.com/pg/BytheOceanweUnite/posts/

- English below

Zelfs tijdens alledaagse activiteiten kun je een verschil maken! Een van onze teamleden is gister gaan uitwaaien in Noordwijk. Helaas betekend de harde wind ook veel meer troep. Maar wel een mooie mogelijkheid voor een mini beach clean-up! Vergeet geen tas mee te nemen zodat je het kan opruimen 😊

Even during daily activities you can make a difference! One of our team members went to the beach yesterday. Unfortunately the harsh winds mean more trash, but it's the perfect opportunity for a mini beach clean-up! Don't forget to bring a bag so you can pick it up 😊



Figure 4. Facebook post by By the Ocean we Unite on February 23, 2020. This post encourages picking up trash as a daily activity, to make a difference. Retrieved March 12, 2020 from www.facebook.com/pg/BytheOceanweUnite/posts/

Plastic soup: what can we do about it?

- 📌 Overview of plastic soup worldwide
- 📌 What can you do in your in daily life?
- 📌 How can you move the industry?
- 📌 How can we influence (local) politics?
- 📌 *optional*: the story of By the Ocean we Unite

Figure 5. Overview on content of lectures given by By the Ocean we Unite. It covers the issue of plastic problems, as well as actions an individual can take to make a change, ranging from actions that can be taken in the private sphere to how politics can be influenced. Retrieved April 9, 2020 from www.bytheoceanweunite.org/lectures/

This demonstrates that the organisation incorporates various steps that can be taken by an individual to help lessen plastic pollution. However, the website and social media posts show that BTOWU predominantly focuses on the actions an individual can take within the private sphere.

Focus on companies

Aside from a general reach out to individuals in society, BTOWU approaches companies as well. Their focus on the reduction of plastic usage by companies could however still be recognized as a focus on the individual:

“How we actually see it, we focus on individuals, but always within companies, within the government. So in that sense, our story will... because we want to inspire on a personal level, and a company is hard to inspire, because a company is a lot of people... But you can inspire the individuals within that company.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

“We invite that company or we come in contact with that company and then we try to convince them that what we do is of importance, that we do something more than just a teambuilding for the company, that it consists of a very substantive story. That works very well in general. It could be better in regards to what we can get out of it. If we have them on board, then we can inspire them with our story. Because I think our strength is that we do not address you as a company like ‘hey, you should be more sustainable within your company’. No, no, no, because that is what happens a lot, that you go to a company and that they are like ‘look how sustainable we are! We do this and this’. The individual then thinks ‘yeah, this is not about me, because I don’t have to do anything, I don’t have to change anything, I just do what I always do’. So in this way we try to inspire the individual and if you have inspired the individual, then that one can change the company with the right tools.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

This indicates that the focus on companies is to reach more individuals. This approach results in reaching a more diverse group than they reach with their other activities or via social media:

“If someone books a teambuilding with us as a company we can get anyone on board, a whole mix of everything. If people book us individually, you get the people we also reach via social media.” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

It demonstrates their strength of using sailing expeditions as their tool to educate and activate. The downside of sailing expedition is the cost of sailing, which has been the reason they started to focus on companies, as well as organising activities other than their sailing expeditions.

“Yes, unfortunately we cannot offer it for free, what we would love to do. That we choose you, you and you with all different backgrounds, you have to come. The CEO of Shell, but also

someone from the Schilderswijk¹ or around the corner from Southeast². That would be the most fun, to get those on board and share stories together and see how we solve problems. That is far in the future, but hopefully it will succeed.” (Interviewee 1, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

Their reasoning to target companies is therefore a practical solution to the limitations they face when reaching out to individuals. Yet, this is not the only way they interact with companies as they enter collaborations with companies as well:

“We have for example a collaboration plan with Iglo. They have first asked other organisations, but they all didn’t want to, they didn’t want to be associated with Iglo. We do want to talk to them, because then we can change something, you know. So now they have tips and tricks on their packages and they reach a big audience, way bigger than we could reach. We don’t sell anything with a sticker on it on the shelves of Albert Heijn, you know, so, so that is just very beautiful, and... And then you do really change things.” (Interviewee 2, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

Iglo is a well-known brand for frozen fish and vegetables within Europe. In 2019 they decided to help reduce plastic pollution, which has taken form of a collaboration with BTOWU and the encouragement of picking up trash and easy adjustments individuals can apply to reduce their plastic use (Sponsor Report, 2019). Although products of Iglo are sold in other supermarkets as well, their availability in the Albert Heijn, the largest chain of supermarkets in The Netherlands (DistriFood, n.d.), illustrates the efficacy of the message of the stickers being spread throughout the country.

To conclude, BTOWU is open to collaborating with companies, as they regard this as a means to reach more individuals that can help reduce plastic pollution.

Focus on the government

Finally, BTOWU also wants the government to act. Apart from the description of this aim on their Facebook page, this element of their strategy is not abundantly apparent on their social media or their website. Nevertheless, during one of the interviews the ban on plastic bags by the Dutch government was provided as a successful example in which the importance of the government’s role can be recognized. Another interviewee elaborated on the role of the government and politicians as follows:

¹ A neighbourhood in The Hague

² A district of Amsterdam

“The government has to come with policies, but this is of course also always an interplay. The government will not come with policies if no one else attaches any value to these. So there should be enough citizens that think something of it, who will also articulate this, so the government will do something with it. So yes, there should be policies, but that will not come if there is no citizen who is concerned. So. And that is also not possible, because those politicians are also just people, outside their role, they are also just informed by various sources. So. No, I really believe, and that might sound very dull, that it should come from all layers and that if you see people as individuals and not the government as a group and consumers as a group, because all politicians are consumers and consumers can for sure exert influence on the government. So. It just has to happen everywhere. And yes, would you then like to focus on informing politicians or would you then like to focus on informing the consumer. That is a choice you can make, but for me, these are all just people.” (Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

In other words, BTOWU is convinced that steps by the government will be taken when either individuals urge the government to do so or individuals within the government want these steps to be taken.

6. Analysis

To act effectively on plastic pollution in the ocean and achieve social change, it is essential to recognize the presence of power dimensions and hegemony in the strategy used and thus in the content of the collected data, which have been summarized in the previous chapter. The following paragraphs will contain an analysis of these findings using the theoretical concepts of power, hegemony and social change.

6.1 The individual framed as responsible

According to the vision of BTOWU, they perceive a necessity to act collectively in order to stop plastic entering the ocean. Acting collectively is perceived as necessary to create social change (Berberoglu, 2017b), but BTOWU seems to view acting collectively as individualized collective action, in which every individual plays their role in the solution within the private sphere (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2015).

The actions that need to be taken by individuals is demonstrated by the posts on social media. For this, it needs to be considered that BTOWU utilizes LinkedIn to reach companies, Twitter to create the opportunity to be approached, and Facebook and Instagram to target individuals in general. Raising the question about an alternative for pet waste bags on Facebook (Figure 1) can therefore demonstrate their assumption that change has to happen on the individual level. This similar

question, but posted on LinkedIn would imply companies to come up with a solution. Now, the individual is made responsible to bring forth an alternative.

The products that can be purchased on their website, and the recommendations they give are in line with de Moor and Verhaegen (2020)'s view on political consumerism. Political consumerism is way of expressing one's "political ideas, preferences, and values" through the daily purchases of an individual (Maxton-Lee, 2020, p. 44). De Moor and Verhaegen (2020) point out that this can be the stepping stone toward becoming motivated to help achieve social change. Over time, political consumerism "increases one's political concerns, which in turn increases engagement in both institutional and non-institutional forms of political participation" (de Moor & Verhaegen, 2020, p. 107). This political participation could be what BTOWU refers to in Figure 4 as the influence one can have on (local) politics. It corresponds to the "low-commitment active citizenship" described by Stern et al. (1999, p. 82), as a way individuals can contribute to achieving social change.

Political consumerism however also suggests that problems arise due to individual choices (Adams, Estrada-Villalta, Sullivan, & Markus, 2019), and that solutions rely on individuals using their means to act on their responsibility to make a change (Eli, Dolan, Schneider, & Ulijaszek, 2016). It makes individuals responsible for issues beyond their ability to change (Adams et al., 2019; Maxton-Lee, 2020) and is driven by corporate actors and businesses and thus could be said to be constructed by the ruling class (Maxton-Lee, 2020). Uzzell and Rätzkel (2009) express their view on this reasoning as follows: "wisely consuming what has already been produced is to put the cart before the horse" (p. 9). In other words, what is being consumed is influenced by what is being produced (Huber, 2019).

Consumption can also be linked to the invisible power, that has normalized the consumption of certain products. "If A had not acted (or failed to act) in a certain way . . . then B would have thought and acted differently from the way he does actually think and act." (Lukes, 2005, p. 44). From this point of view, it can be argued that certain behaviour is made possible, while other behaviour is not.

Promoting "individual change implies that the consumer is doing wrong" (Reese, 2020, p. 4). It has led to a shift of blame of environmental problems towards the individual (Adams et al., 2019; Brand, 2007; Dias, Guareschi, & Hennigen, 2017; Maniates, 2001; Wall, 2000), which can be seen as a discourse that puts responsibility on individuals rather than social and economic structures in society (Brand, 2007; Wall, 2000). This is in line with observations and research done by scholars (Lerch, Bromley, Ramirez, & Meyer, 2016; Wall, 2000), which has shown an increase of focus on individual change over the last few decades. This focus on behaviour and habits of individuals reduce the ability to critique the structures that define what is available to an individual (Maniates, 2001; Wall, 2000).

6.2 Recognition of hegemonic powers

By the Ocean We Unite's explanation of their vision, as described in section 5.1, indicates an understanding of power dimensions within society and its problem of plastic pollution. They explain their focus on individuals as seeing them as the agents of change. The following quote of one of the interviewees demonstrates the existing ambiguity of this focus:

"I don't know, if I think very philosophically, that should be in every person, that responsibility, but companies are driven by power and money, and yes, the consumer has its demands as well, you know." (Interviewee 2, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

They recognize that companies are driven by power, but the impact of this power has not been brought up during the interviews. An example in which the power of companies can be recognized is in the promotion of recycling. The interviewees have mentioned the importance of more efficient recycling and a circular economy, although one of them argued that plastic should not be used at all in the ideal situation. The latter comment is in line with Zink and Geyer (2018), who argue that recycling does not prevent plastic from eventually being incinerated or discarded. In other words, recycling does not offer a long-term solution for plastic waste and demonstrates the importance of seeing it solely as a stepping stone. More importantly, it is possible to identify recycling as a result of a hegemonic struggle, in which corporate actors managed to incorporate concerns of consumers (Jaeger, 2018). Corporate actors are however able to steer the solutions towards their preferences and "frame socio environmental problems from their own perspective and promote solutions of their own design" (Jaeger, 2018, p. 396). Recycling then is a way to shift the responsibility towards consumers, which benefits the interests of these corporate actors (Jaeger, 2018).

This can also be recognized in collaborations with companies, such as the one described in section 5.2.3. When companies benefit from the status quo, they may not have an incentive to change the status quo (Uzzell & Rätzl, 2009). The only incentive to change would be an increasing societal concern for plastic pollution, to avoid regulations from higher institutions (Jacobsen & Dulrud, 2007). On the one hand, this can be seen as part of the transition towards a future with less waste; that it initiates and promotes improvements of the market. From a Gramscian perspective this could however be recognized as a way in which companies use their power to reinforce the idea that change should happen within the private sphere. It reinforces the discourse that individuals have to take on the responsibility to ensure plastic does not end up as pollution. It excludes the responsibility off producers, who can be identified as part of the ruling class benefitting from the production of plastic as well as the current discourse around the problem of plastic.

Taking into account that hegemony is produced through policies as well, it is necessary for an organisation to consider governmental power. Section 5.2.3 showed that BTOWU does not aim to directly change policies. Instead, they intend to educate individuals with the assumption that this will result in individuals entering the political arena:

“As long as there are enough people at some point who will take initiative themselves or who will approach the government or who are in the government that can make a difference there.”

(Interviewee 3, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

This relates to the following section, in which this supposition about the effects of education on the problem of plastic pollution will be discussed.

6.3 The individual portrayed as acting on knowledge

By the Ocean We Unite considers information and education as crucial to activating individuals to address plastic pollution. Knowledge on the amount and impacts of plastic is indeed crucial, however not enough to solve the problem (Evans, 2012; Gifford, 2014; Pahl et al., 2017; Steg & Vlek, 2009; Uzzell & Rätzl, 2009). It is important to recognize that informational strategies can only be used for behavioural changes that do not require substantial sacrifices (Gifford, 2014), such as money, time and social approval (Steg & Vlek, 2009). Most behaviours are influenced by economic and political factors (Gifford, 2014) and “physical infrastructure, technical facilities, the availability of products, and product characteristics” (Steg & Vlek, 2009, p. 312). By the Ocean we Unite indeed recognizes this, but is convinced easy adjustments in lifestyle can be the first step in making a change (Interviewee 1, personal communication, April 6, 2020). Nevertheless, making more difficult adjustments are hindered by what is made available by the ruling class. Consequently, this hindrance needs to be addressed to make the more effective adjustments possible.

Moreover, behaviour that involves the use of plastics does not always have alternatives (Boström & Klintman, 2019; Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007), as the posts on pet waste bags already indicates. This means that not all use of plastics can be attributed to the individual. When one argues that it would be possible to avoid those acts in which plastic is involved, one would make this “a full-time preoccupation” which is “not feasible for most people” (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007, p. 477). Furthermore, the alternatives to plastic that are available on the market might pose a threat to (social) sustainability in a different way, “shifting the problem, rather than tackling it” (Victory, 2020, para. 17).

Lastly, the last paragraph demonstrated the assumption of BTOWU that an individual will become politically active when becoming aware of the impacts of plastic pollution. Whether an individual will engage in politics depends on more than knowledge, as resources (e.g. knowledge and time),

psychological engagement, and support of others are preconditions to participate (Brady, Verba, & Lehman Schlozman, 1995). Brady et al. (1995) describe psychological engagement as the desire to be active, due to the belief that participation can make a difference or due to one's concern about the issue. The subsequent section demonstrates that BTOWU aims to increase this psychological engagement through the promotion of biospheric values.

6.4 Promoting biospheric values

By the Ocean we Unite has shown a unique asset in educating and activating individuals, as described in section 5.2.1. Their desire to share and spread their passion for the ocean and marine life indicates an opportunity to increase the motivation to act. This motivation that is embedded in appreciation for nature is categorized as biospheric motivation (Hartley et al., 2018; Steg & Vlek, 2009). Altruistic and biospheric values are likely to be endorsed together, respectively representing one's concern with the well-being of others, and the state of the environment (Steg & de Groot, 2012). These values have been associated with long-term commitment to reduce plastic pollution (Pahl et al., 2017) and pro-environmental behaviour in general (Fornara et al., 2020). The promotion of biospheric values should be the main focus for organisations, as these values, as well as altruistic values, are known to be associated with pro-environmental beliefs, attitudes, norms and choices (De Groot & Steg, 2008; Steg & de Groot, 2012; Stern et al., 1999), and can thus be used to alter those attitudes, norms and beliefs that are present in the dominant discourse. Since the impacts of plastic on humans are still indefinite compared to the impacts on oceans and marine life as discussed in Chapter 2, promoting the biospheric values can be seen as most effective.

In summary, the analysis has demonstrated a focus on changes within the private sphere. Other actors are being approached as well, yet as a means to encourage individuals to change institutions from within. Accordingly, change is not demanded, but is assumed to follow as individuals prioritize the issue. These priorities are a result of the promotion of biospheric values in the organisation's activities, which is a valuable addition to the educational approach of which it is assumed to be sufficient to change behaviour.

7. Discussion

This chapter will discuss the significance of the research done in the fight against plastic pollution. The research questions have guided the research in order to gain a new perspective on how NGOs approach the issue and why. This perspective will be discussed in section 7.1. In section 7.2, I will elaborate on this and further research in regard to this elaboration will be mentioned in section 7.3.

7.1 Implications of the research done

The analysis has demonstrated that the organisation recognizes the desire of the ruling class for power and identifies plastic pollution as a fault within the system. They emphasize the role of the individual and more specifically on the changes one must make in the private sphere. Their executed strategy demonstrates the responsibility that is laid upon the individual. Although BTOWU intends to focus on the responsibility of companies and governments as well, the agent of change is still considered to be the individual. This is evident in their approach to and reasoning of how companies could play a role and how beneficial policies are created and applied.

The strategy as such can be recognized to be a reproduction of the discourse on individualized responsibility. In other words, individuals are made responsible for the global problem of plastic pollution. This discourse has been beneficial for the ruling class, as it has taken away the pressure to change the status quo. The reproduction of the discourse on individualized responsibility indicates that the NGO is currently acting in conformity of the hegemony as it is. Tackling plastic pollution asks for a different discourse in which the emphasis is not solely on individuals.

7.1.1 Educational approach as more than an informational strategy

Organisations such as BTOWU have the potential to change norms through their passion for the ocean and storytelling, which Stern et al. (1999) propose as a way for individuals to help create social change. The value-norm-belief-theory (VNB-theory) is a theory that describes how the different forms of support can be encouraged (Stern et al., 1999). The VBN-theory states that an individual will demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour when biospheric and altruistic values are endorsed. These values will lead to an awareness of adverse consequences and an awareness of the responsibility to act. The result is a change in personal norms and eventually a change in behaviour (Stern et al., 1999). For organisations it can thus be important to encourage individuals to prioritize values that lead to pro-environmental behaviour.

Although “people’s love for the ocean is a powerful motivator”, “systemic approaches to stop the problem at its source” (Pahl et al., 2017, p. 697) are necessary. It has to be acknowledged that pro-environmental behaviour cannot always be adopted. It follows, then, that rather than solely focusing on changing one’s behaviour, NGOs should consider tackling the difficulties an individual can face when trying to change. These difficulties will differ per individual, influenced by for example their socioeconomic status, gender, religion or residence. What is available and achievable for individuals could be traced back to the dominant discourse and the exercise of power which determines individuals’ opportunities. In order to make every individual adopt more pro-environmental behaviour, it is necessary for (other) individuals to address these structural constraints. The following

paragraph will discuss the possibilities to transform the discourse by giving individuals the power to effectively act on the issue.

7.1.2 Creating awareness on power and different forms of actions

An educational approach, as present in many NGOs fighting plastic pollution, should include action-knowledge, which is knowledge that helps to understand the concrete actions one can take to effectively address the problem (Liobikienė & Poškus, 2019). It has been discussed that changing behaviour is not dependent on awareness alone due to structural constraints. Therefore, all aspects of the problem need to be covered. Hence, it needs to be recognized how ideology can frame the problem and its solutions. Consequently, an organisation can develop opportunities for individuals to think critically and recognize this ideology as well. In addition to the encouragement of making changes within the private sphere, individuals have to be inspired to act on the problem on a more structural level. This will reduce the reinforcement of the hegemonic discourse on individualized responsibility as well as address the problem of plastic pollution more extensively. NGOs could for example encourage concerned individuals through existing communication avenues and activities to write to politicians and institutions.

This links to the different forms of support, described in section 4.2, being public activism, “low-commitment active citizenship”, “support and acceptance of public policies” and “changes in behaviour in the personal or private sphere” (Stern et al., 1999, p. 82). The example above can be categorized as participating as a citizen in society, which is one approach of many to ensure power, not blame, is granted to the individual.

Although BTOWU has been identified as an instrumental case with regard to its activities, their sailing expeditions differentiate them from other NGOs. The insights into what could strengthen BTOWU’s approach will be adopted in a different way than an NGO that has assets elsewhere. Nevertheless, the recommendations to be aware of the role of power in the problem of plastic pollution, to encourage individuals to act in various ways and the promotion of biospheric values is general enough to be implemented by diverse NGOs.

7.2 Considerations

Despite the possibilities that are brought by the approach of power and hegemony, it has given the suggestion that individual action should be rejected. Individual action has often been set against collective action (Dedekorkut, 2011), but within the field of sociology and sustainability science, the debate on how issues should be addressed is still ongoing. With social theorists’ numerous views on the organisation of society, both approaches can be justified. By choosing a Gramscian approach with

a focus on invisible power, I have been able to present an interpretation on how plastic pollution is and can be addressed.

This perspective can be insightful for NGOs, that have consciously or unconsciously been targeting issues in line with a different perspective. However, it does not mean that this perspective is the most desirable. By using Stern's view on the different forms of support I reject the dichotomy of individual versus collective action. Both are needed (Wainwright, 2017) and are able to trigger the initiation of the other, which for example organisation Bye Bye Plastic Bags illustrates by encouraging both political action and changes within the private sphere to reduce the use of plastic bags (Bye Bye Plastic Bags, n.d.). It is therefore primarily desirable that NGOs are aware of the existing understandings of how society is organised and thus how society can be changed. Ultimately, this awareness will be valuable for the development of strategies and result in enhanced approaches.

7.3 Future research

The previous section indicated that social problems can be approached from different perspectives. It could therefore be relevant to identify NGOs that address the issue of plastic pollution deliberately from a distinct point of view, and compare individuals' experiences after participating in those NGOs' activities.

Furthermore, NGOs that consider individuals as the agent of change should recognize the diversity of individuals in regard to for example their socioeconomic status and gender. These factors and the impact it has on an individual's ability to act could be said to be defined by power and dominant discourses. It could therefore be relevant to investigate how the issue of plastic pollution, the activities by NGOs, and the role of the individual is perceived by different groups. Moreover, further research could include participants' perspectives to investigate the implementation of the given recommendations.

Finally, this research intended to give insights into the approach NGOs take to fight plastic pollution, but its results could be relevant when researching NGOs that are engaged with other issues as well, such as biodiversity loss, global warming and fast fashion.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to contribute to the effectiveness of NGOs fighting plastic pollution. Many NGOs address plastic pollution primarily for its harmful effects on marine life. However, the problem of plastic pollution is argued to be a social issue and should therefore be approached as such. Despite the variety of NGOs in this space, employing different tactics to meet the challenge of an ocean without plastic, a reliance on individuals as the agents of change has been the focus of this thesis. In

order to answer the research questions that aim to explore NGOs strategies and the possibilities to improve these, NGOs' strategies have been analysed through the instrumental case of By the Ocean we Unite. A content analysis of interviews with board members and the website and social media posts of this Dutch NGO has been conducted to explore their strategy and its execution. It has been analysed through the concepts of Lukes' theory on power and Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

This analysis has demonstrated that the NGO's strategy include foremost an educational feature, that is used to reach out to individuals. This focus on the individual is informed by the organisation's view that individuals are able to change the system. However, it has also shown that By the Ocean we Unite is susceptible as an NGO to reinforce a discourse that asks individuals to change their behaviour, without addressing the power of the ruling class that is benefitting from this discourse. Their educational approach is based on the assumption that awareness of the impacts of plastic pollution leads to action. This is associated with individuals' behaviour in the private sphere, suggesting that changing this behaviour will lessen or solve the problem. The mention of the inability of changing one's behaviour due to structural constraints is absent. Another finding was that when endorsed, their emphasis on biospheric values leads to pro-environmental behaviour.

From these findings, suggestions have been made to improve NGOs' approaches to tackle plastic pollution. The first suggestion entails an increased awareness within the NGO on the invisible influence of powerful actors on how plastic pollution and its solutions are perceived. Accordingly, educational activities should be informed by this awareness, aiming to promote other forms of support besides changes within the private sphere. That way, NGOs might help transform the discourse and give individuals the power to help fight plastic pollution.

9. References

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10. Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide for board members By the Ocean we Unite

Introduction

Give a short summary on who I am, what I study and the motivation for and focus of my research. Explain the reason for selecting By the Ocean we Unite as case study and the board members as interviewees. Inform the interviewees on the implications on permitting the interviews to be used (e.g. thesis will be published on Lund University public website). Ask permission to record the interview and explain data is used for academic purposes only and recordings and transcriptions will be deleted after the thesis has been finalized. Inform the interviewee that ending the interview is possible at any given moment.

The interview will cover the following categories: structure of the organisation, goal of the organisation and its strategy to bring about change. The following questions give an impression on what can be discussed.

Introductory questions

1. What is your role within By the Ocean we Unite?
2. How did you get involved with By the Ocean we Unite?

Questions regarding the structure of the organisation

3. How is By the Ocean we Unite structured as an organisation?
4. With who do you collaborate? How was this initiated?
5. How is By the Ocean we Unite financially arranged?

Questions regarding By the Ocean we Unite's aim and mission

6. What is the main goal of By the Ocean we Unite?
7. What do you do to reach this goal?
8. What makes By the Ocean we Unite unique?
9. What is perceived as the cause of plastic pollution?
10. What is perceived as the solution to plastic pollution?
11. Who is responsible for this?

Questions regarding the target group and social media

12. What is the group By the Ocean we Unite targets? Why?

13. How are you reaching out to them?

General questions and concluding remarks

14. How do you personally foresee the future?

Appendix 2: Summary of answered follow-up questions

Questions were asked to fully understand answers given during the interview and to get a deeper understanding of certain topics. All three interviewees were asked to elaborate on the solutions that are put forward by them or by participants during lectures and educational programs. Additionally, I asked them to elaborate on the meaning of behavioural change, as they made use of that word during the interviews.

The other questions were addressed to the interviewees individually, to which one interviewee replied. The question for this interviewee served as a way to go deeper into a specific comment the interviewee made on the changes that have to be made within a company. Additionally, a question was asked that referred to a comment made by one of the other interviewees, in which the responsibility of coming up with a solution was discussed.

Appendix 3: Summary of unanswered follow-up questions

Unanswered questions that were addressed to the interviewees individually have not been able to contribute to the analysis. These questions involved further information on how they envision future use of plastic, in regard to circular design and current inefficient recycling. Secondly, I asked one interviewee to elaborate on the collaboration with the company Iglo. In response to one of the remarks made on the role of citizens I invited one interviewee to expand on how citizens should articulate their opinion in regard to governmental processes.