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CSR communication: quo vadis?

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CSR communication: *quo vadis?*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce the special issue on CSR communication attached to the First International CSR Communication Conference held in Amsterdam in October 2011. The aim of the introduction is also to review CSR communication papers published in scholarly journals in order to make a summary of the state of CSR communication knowledge.

Design/methodology/approach – The existing literature on CSR communication was approached via systematic review, with a combination of conventional and summative qualitative content analysis. The final dataset contained 90 papers from two main business and management databases, i.e. EBSCOhost and ProQuest.

Findings – Papers were coded into three main categories. The results show that the majority of the papers are concerned with disclosure themes. Considerably less salient are papers that fall under process-oriented themes and the outcomes/consequences of CSR communications. The most important outlets for CSR communication-related topics are *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.

Originality/value – This paper represents the first attempt to perform a systematic and comprehensive overview of CSR communication papers in scholarly journals. Its value is in making this rather vast and heterogeneous literature more visible and accessible to all CSR communication scholars.

Keywords CSR communication, Scholarly journals, Systematic review, Content analysis, Special issue, Journals, Social responsibility

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been at the forefront of the international academic and professional literature and of corporate attention for quite some time. Lee (2007) has noted that CSR has shifted from an irrelevant and obscure idea to one of the most widely accepted concepts in the academic and business world in the past 20 years. Research on CSR is very widespread and embedded in several different areas, including all communicative elements involved (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Ihlen *et al.*, 2011).



Broadly, CSR means a company's role in, and impact upon, the economic, environmental and social framework in which it is embedded (Crane *et al.*, 2004). The core of CSR is the idea that no company can afford to act in opposition to, or in isolation of, issues in society and alienated from its stakeholders (Matten and Moon, 2005). Hence, CSR can be considered a participative social process where communication has a central role (Sorsa, 2008).

CSR communication is indeed gaining more significant attention in academia and practice. Indicators of this may be one of the first Special Issues on CSR communication-related topics that was issued in *Journal of Marketing Communications* in 2008 (Podnar, 2008) and the first comprehensive handbook of CSR communication that was issued in 2011 (Ihlen *et al.*, 2011) as well as the fact that the number of academic papers on CSR communication is slowly increasing. Concurrent with scholarly research is also the progressively visible communicative practice of CSR, the evidence being that more than 90 per cent of FTSE 100 companies were publishing information on their CSR activities in 2008 (Schmeltz, 2012).

However, even though there is an increase in CSR communication topics in the literature, Ihlen *et al.* (2011) still found that compared to the vast literature on CSR, the part on CSR communication is rather scarce and in the periphery. The authors note, however, that some potentially valuable work on CSR communication has been done within the fields of management and communication. The question of whether CSR communication has had a noticeable impact on the mainstream management literature is difficult to answer. The answer depends on which perspective is adopted. If it is specifically about communication scholarship being cross-fertilised and cited, then it may be argued that CSR communication does not seem yet to have had a significant impact on the mainstream literature yet (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012). However, at the same time, much of the CSR literature in management can be conceptually seen as at least partly being about communication, i.e. the literature regarding disclosure, reporting, reputation, etc. The review in this article and some of the papers in the Special Issue support the latter reading.

A closer review of the literature and the selection of the papers in this Special Issue suggest that the potential value in research and practice of a broad range of CSR communication papers found in the literature is nevertheless considerably fragmented. Thus, in order to address this issue, a Special Issue of *CCIJ* was planned in the summer of 2009. As we spread the word we realised that many professionals and academics were struggling with the same need for information, research, and knowledge on the topic of CSR communication. Hence, the idea to organise the first International CSR Communication Conference in Amsterdam, October 2011, was born. Eighty papers were submitted to the Conference and the authors came from over more than 30 countries, representing all parts of the world. The aim of this Special Issue is to present a selection of the best papers presented at the 2011 International CSR Communication Conference. All of them have been reviewed after their first versions were introduced at the conference. However, in order to understand in what way the papers introduced in this Special Issue can contribute to the field of CSR communication, we decided to include a systematic review and a summary of the state of CSR communication knowledge as an integral part of this editorial.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: first, we briefly introduce the main views and understandings of CSR communication found in the literature,

focusing on their epistemological orientation. Next, according to our aim to tidy up the fragmentation of CSR communication literature, we describe our dataset and the methods we used to analyse and interpret our dataset. Then, the results of our analyses are presented. We then conclude this introduction by presenting the papers selected for this Special issue and providing some final comments.

The importance and understandings of CSR communication

Based on the overviews of the CSR communication literature made by Ihlen *et al.* (2011) and May *et al.* (2007), for example, it can be argued that this area of research is heterogeneous and that scholars tackle the notion of CSR communication from different perspectives:

- public relations and corporate communication;
- marketing communication;
- organisational communication; and
- organisational studies.

All these perspectives try to accentuate the important role of communication for CSR. However, as pointed out in recent studies (e.g. Garriga and Melé, 2004; Gond and Matten, 2007; Schultz, 2013), they have different epistemological orientations and perceive organisations differently, which also influences their understandings of the communication role of CSR.

As noted by Deetz (2007) a significant part of existing CSR communication models and practices is mainly traditional and strategic, growing out of hierarchy and control. The epistemological foundation of these models is hidden in the managerial/technical approach to organisational effectiveness (Mumby and Stohl, 1996). In line with the positivist research in management and marketing studies, which justifies a positive relationship between social activities and business revenues (Orlitzky *et al.*, 2003, Porter and Kramer, 2006), CSR communication is, in a more instrumental sense, often about communicating CSR. This means that it is about using promotional techniques that are directed at informing about companies' CSR and actively supporting CSR-based brand identity and reputation. Mostly, such traditional models of communication are functionalistic and preoccupied with the means and the ways of how to influence stakeholders' perceptions regarding CSR activities, or at best they are oriented toward achieving some sort of consent with stakeholders (e.g. Morsing, 2006; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). In these models communication is often addressed from a transmission perspective following the classical and linear approach to communication as "conduit" (Putnam and Boys, 2006), in which communication is reduced to a functionalistic information process model born in the 1940s (Shannon and Weaver, 1948). CSR communication is hence conceived as a means to influence stakeholders' perception of organisations in terms of the resources of information (specific contents, media, channels or rhetorical arsenals) they use to inform stakeholders about their CSR policies and activities. The functionalistic approach is particularly prevalent in marketing and public relations oriented research, where stakeholders' perception of a business's CSR performances are measured according to how specific strategic CSR issues such as CSR motives and stakeholder benefits are communicated (Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009b; Du *et al.*, 2010). Conceptualising, planning and carrying out CSR

messages to customers, consumers, media, NGOs, authorities, etc., are framed as key drivers for enhancing businesses's image and reputation. Such views of CSR communication fail to consider the role of communication for the negotiation of public expectations and the institutional conditions that influence organisations, and herewith for building CSR practices, implying that communication is a separate sphere not related to other organisational practices such as CSR (e.g. Christensen and Cheney, 2011).

In contrast to the prevailing conceptualisation of CSR communication, some of the recent publications on CSR embrace an alternative, constructivist understanding of communication (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Christensen and Cheney, 2011; Schultz, 2013). They imply that CSR should be perceived as an essentially communicative challenge (e.g. Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Within the constructivist or "constitutive" approach to CSR communication, researchers are particularly concerned with how organisations interact and connect with stakeholders with the aim of negotiating and discussing CSR projects and activities as a process of achieving mutual understanding, as well as with the dysfunctional effects. Following this, the objective of CSR communication is addressed as a holistic framework for how to deal with processes of CSR from an intra- and inter-organisational development perspective, in which co-creation and negotiation play a significant role for anchoring CSR as sensemaking in and around the organisation (e.g. Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Table I provides an overview of how the two approaches address CSR communication.

The bases of CSR as communication are to be found in Habermasian critical theory of communication (Deetz, 2007; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007) as well as in the social-constructivist understanding of communication (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Christensen and Cheney, 2011), and the theoretical perspective known as "communication constitutes organisations – CCO" (Schultz, 2013), which is also represented in this Special Issue by Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013). The idea of an alternative understanding of CSR communication is to overcome the technical approaches to communication by emphasising either that how one talks about CSR influences how CSR is practised (Deetz, 2007) or that CSR talk is in fact CSR action (Christensen and Cheney, 2011). It emphasises the alternative idea of CSR, which is not regarded as tool for the production of reputation or legitimacy, but as a dynamic continuum of competing, communicatively negotiated meanings, as a construct or "symbolic resource", that is constituted and used in the dynamic interplay of a variety of internal and external actors (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Hence, two main emphases of CSR communication can be derived out of these epistemological foundations. First, there is the idea of CSR communication as a form of democratic communication – echoed in multiple and often contradicting voices of

Characteristic	Functionalistic approach to CSR communication	Constitutive approach to CSR communication
Conceptualisation	Messaging	Interaction
Objective	Transparency	Co-creation
Metaphor	Conduit	Connectness
Channel	Monological	Dialogical
Perspective	Sequential	Holistic

Table I.
The functionalistic and the constitutive approach to CSR communication

different stakeholders. Such communication does not intend to lead to consensus where stakeholders must suppress their views, needs and internal conflicts to reach an agreement. Rather, it is reflected in participation aimed at creative and mutually satisfying outcomes and is often based in conflict rather than consent (Deetz, 2007). As CSR communication is also a form of moral communication, by which corporations produce expectations and bind themselves to partially idealistic promises, it does not only produce opportunities, as argued in instrumental perspectives. In these conflictive environments, moralisations of reality also produce risk for the legitimacy of corporations (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). The second emphasis embraces and supplements the first one in understanding CSR communication as a holistic endeavour based on the constitutive view, where organisations emerge in communication (Christensen and Cheney, 2011). Or as pointed out by the authors in this Special Issue: communication should encompass the organisation as a whole, both in terms of individual human agency as well as non-human communicative practices such as institutionalised practices, symbols, texts, and artefacts which are also elements that constitute an organisation (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013).

Alternative perspectives on CSR and CSR communication mainly reside in the realm of organisational communication studies, which are primarily concerned with theories and research trying to understand the organisational life through the communication perspective (Mumby and Stohl, 1996). Thus, organisational communication studies' rationale for grasping CSR communication is different from the rationale adopted by the corporate communication field. The latter focuses mainly on concrete communication skills, practices and outcomes while the former is more theoretical covering broader issues of how organisations function (Mumby and Stohl, 1996). Consequently, the work on CSR communication in the organisational communication studies may currently be viewed as relatively abstract, not (yet) extensively theoretically or empirically investigated (Deetz, 2007) and therefore not overly present in the journal papers on CSR communication.

The need for a systematic review of CSR communication literature

We do acknowledge the two main views (i.e. traditional and alternative) relevant to CSR communication and their potential contributions for advancing the CSR communication field. However, the lack of salience of the alternative approaches understanding CSR as communication in the CSR communication literature that focus on communicative perspectives of the CSR, leads us to employ a different angle and to search for and try to understand other distinctive contributions to knowledge development in the field. Hence, to compile the knowledge on CSR communication and to capture the value of forthcoming research in this field it is necessary to explicitly summarise what is known, which topics are covered and which are not, regardless of the paradigm they are based on. This was done by means of a systematic review, which summarises "in an explicit way what is known and not known about a specific practice-related question" (Briner *et al.*, 2009, p. 19). A systematic review does not provide answers. It provides a report of what is known and not known about the specific question or theme. Hence, the primary goal of such a review is to present information and not to offer advice or solutions. The approaches of a systematic review are selected according to the purpose of the study and the nature of the available data (Briner *et al.*, 2009). For our purposes we decided to use a combination of conventional

and summative qualitative content analysis with identifying keywords before and during data analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). We approached the texts in relation to a particular content – in our case we used different aspects of CSR communication (summative approach). This was, in turn, complemented with a conventional search for the patterns expressed in the papers that were further sorted into categories and into meaningful clusters of themes. We then also decided to quantify the papers that were subdivided into a specific topic in order to see which themes prevail in the CSR communication literature.

Methodologically, to obtain a comprehensive review of CSR communication topics in the literature, we searched within academic papers in the two most important management and communication databases:

- (1) ProQuest ABI/Inform, which that covers around 6,800 journals in total; and
- (2) EBSCO Business and Communication & Mass Media Complete, which includes over 5,000 journals within the management and communication fields.

Our review was not restricted by date. The keywords used for the title, abstract and keyword fields were:

- corporate responsibility/corporate social responsibility/social responsibility/CSR communication;
- communicating corporate social responsibility/corporate responsibility/social responsibility/CSR; and
- CSR advertising.

In our search we decided to focus exclusively on the topics that are discussed under the “CSR communication” domain, deliberately excluding such communicative terms as accountability and reporting and alternative themes such as corporate citizenship or sustainability. The reason for this was to avoid conceptual unclarity – following the argument made by De Bakker *et al.* (2005): although such other concepts may be linked to CSR communication, they are often grounded in separate theoretical debates. Initial searches yielded 184 scholarly papers. After reviewing abstracts and removing any repetitive results two researches independently examined the papers to determine inclusion. A total of 90 papers remained after this process, compiling the final list of papers.

Ways of thinking about CSR communication

The aim of the analysis was to identify which topics/themes/issues are most commonly addressed in the literature on CSR communication. Based on the analysis, we made three final general clusters of themes covered by the papers on CSR communication:

- (1) disclosure/accountability;
- (2) process; and
- (3) outcomes/consequences.

The first cluster contains three sub-categories, while the other two each contain two sub-categories based on the emergent categories. A hierarchical structure of the categories is presented in the tree diagram (Figure 1).

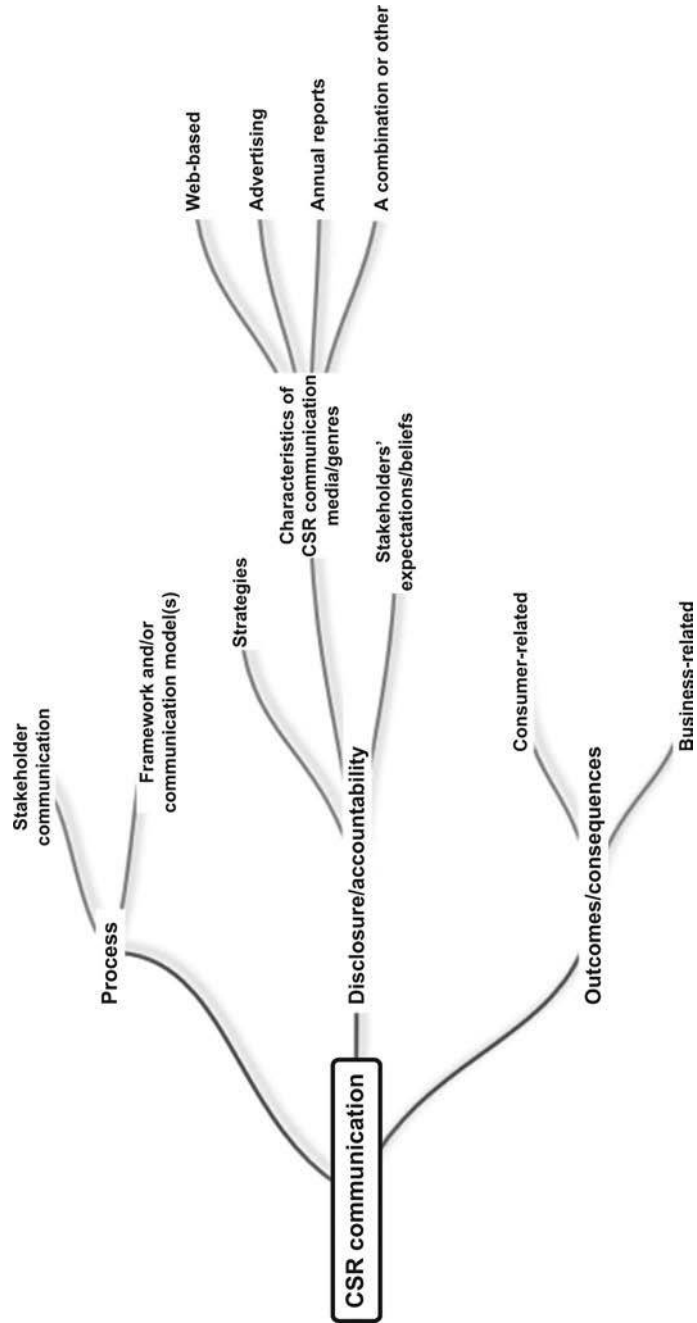


Figure 1.
Tree diagram of CSR
communication topics in
the literature

The idea of a relatively broad category of disclosure/accountability-oriented papers on CSR communication derives from the observation of a variety of issues the authors are interested in when tackling the question of how a modern organisation approaches the challenge of “putting its CSR into words”. One can observe, however, that these issues typically refer to the usage of CSR communication media and genres, strategies of communicating CSR, or the question of stakeholders’ expectations regarding how an organisation ought to communicate about CSR (e.g. Tixier, 2003; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Morsing *et al.*, 2008; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009). A lot of research in this field is case-study based.

The sub-topic referring to the characteristics of CSR communication media/genre is by far the largest and is additionally sub-categorised, taking into consideration the existence of a variety of CSR communication media or genres. Here a special distinction between media and genre is not made due to the possible interaction that exists between both concepts (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). However, we draw on the distinction between them as defined by Yates and Orlikowski (1992, pp. 310-1) where media is understood primarily as physical means of communication while genre can be defined as typified communicative action. In general, however, the papers appear to address the issues and specific characteristics of CSR via:

- web-based communication, addressing the characteristics of CSR content and their indicators (e.g. Capriotti and Moreno, 2007; Chaudhri and Wang, 2007; Dincer and Dincer, 2010);
- advertising, interested mainly in using advertising as a communication tool for CSR disclosure and implications of such usage (e.g. Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009a; Van de Pol and de Bakker, 2010; Dhar, 2011);
- annual reports, tackling the visibility and amount of disclosure, general reporting guidelines and stakeholder issues (e.g. Golob and Bartlett, 2007; Waller and Lanis, 2009; Tewari, 2011); and
- a combination or other media/genres (e.g. Wang and Chaudhri, 2009).

Many papers addressing the strategies of communicating CSR or the question of stakeholders’ expectations regarding how an organisation ought to communicate about its CSR, is concerned with the question how intensively and in what ways should an organisation communicate its CSR actions (e.g. Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Pollach *et al.*, 2012) and how should stakeholders be involved into these processes (e.g. Bowd *et al.*, 2006; Birth *et al.*, 2008).

The second general topic with reference to CSR communication is not concerned so much with the approach to the disclosure as with the context/environment (and its elements) within which CSR communication practices take place – i.e. it shifts the focus towards CSR communication as a process in relation to two sub-topics. The first sub-topic addresses stakeholder communication, building different frameworks to understand stakeholder communication and its importance (e.g. Jose *et al.*, 2003; Ferré and Tolotti, 2010). The second sub-topic, however, attempts to build a framework of/to present a model for (effective) CSR communication (e.g. Podnar, 2008; Du *et al.*, 2010) focusing also on the role of institutional context and environment in framing CSR communication (e.g. Lammers, 2003; Dobers and Springett, 2010). Based on relatively more theoretical than empirical or case studies, in this second sub-theme, some of the

papers are based on the emerging constitutive understanding of communication (e.g. Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Finally, the third broad CSR communication related topic, which is also the smallest, concentrates on outcomes/consequences of CSR communication (i.e. its effects), which can be sub-categorised as consumer-related (e.g. Wang, 2009) and business-related (e.g. Sjöberg, 2003). The stream that is “consumer-related” tends to focus mainly on how consumers as important stakeholders and receivers of CSR communication react and shape their attitudes and behaviours toward CSR endeavours (e.g. Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2011). The papers categorised in the “business-related” sub-topic are mainly concerned with the effects of CSR communication on the companies themselves in terms of enhancing or damaging corporate image and reputation or building brand equity. This stream of research often builds on experimental studies that measure the direct impact of CSR communication on consumers via surveys.

As the existing CSR communication models and practices are prevalently based on an instrumental notion of communication, it is not surprising that the dominant topic of papers on CSR communication is concerned with the approach to disclosure of CSR practices. Our results show that two thirds of all papers are indeed disclosure-oriented. Among these, more than two thirds deal with the characteristics of CSR communication channel/tool (68.3 per cent); the remaining sub-topics – strategies and stakeholders’ expectations/beliefs – are identified in 16.7 per cent and 4.4 per cent of disclosure-oriented papers, respectively. Moreover, the topic of the characteristics of CSR communication channel/tool is the main sub-topic in almost half of all of the analysed papers (45.6 per cent), implying that their focus is on CSR “message content” and “message channel” (Du *et al.*, 2010, p. 11) – e.g. focusing on analysing CSR issues and on the organisation of CSR information on corporate websites (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007). Most of these types of papers specifically explore the characteristics of advertising as CSR communication channel (36.6 per cent), being followed by those concentrated on the characteristics of web-based CSR communication (24.4 per cent), CSR communication via a combination of channels or other channels (22.0 per cent), and CSR communication in annual reports (17.1 per cent).

Furthermore, the results show that the remainder of papers are either process-oriented or consequence-oriented (17.8 per cent and 15.6 per cent, respectively). The attention of process-oriented ones is shown to be equally divided to the two sub-topics of this category:

- (1) stakeholder communication; and
- (2) building a framework/presenting a communication model(s).

In contrast, the sub-topics of consequence-oriented papers are less equally addressed. The key issue of more than two thirds (71.4 per cent) of consequences-oriented papers is concerned with consumer-related consequences of CSR communication. Business-related issues such as corporate reputation and brand equity, however, account for 28.6 per cent of these papers. Table II summarises the results of the analysis according to the dominant theme/topic of the paper and the percentages of papers concerned with each topic.

The investigation of journals in which the papers in our CSR communication dataset have appeared reveals that papers have appeared in 48 different journals covering marketing, public relations, communication studies, business and management fields (see Table III for main publication sources for CSR communication).

CSR communication	Number of articles	Number of sub-divided articles	Number of total articles
Topic (total)	90		100
Disclosure/accountability (total)	60		66.7
Characteristics of CSR communication media/genre	41	68.3	45.6
Web-based	10	24.4	11.1
Advertising	15	36.6	16.7
Annual reports	7	17.1	7.8
A combination or other	9	22.0	10.0
Strategies	15	25.0	16.7
Stakeholders' expectations/beliefs	4	6.7	4.4
Process (total)	16		17.8
Stakeholder communication	8	50.0	8.9
Framework and/or communication model(s)	8	50.0	8.9
Outcomes/consequences (total)	14		15.6
Consumer-related	10	71.4	11.1
Business-related	4	28.6	4.4

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Table II.
Classification of papers on CSR communication according to the dominant theme/topic of the paper

Journal	Number of papers	Percentage of total	Cumulative percentage
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	10	11.1	11.1
<i>Corporate Communications: An International Journal</i>	8	8.9	20.0
<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>	5	5.6	25.5
<i>Management Communication Quarterly</i>	5	5.6	31.1
<i>Corporate Social Responsibility and Environment Management</i>	4	4.4	35.5
<i>Journal of Marketing Communications</i>	4	4.4	40.0
<i>Business Ethics: A European Review</i>	3	3.3	43.3
<i>Corporate Reputation Review</i>	3	3.3	46.7
<i>Public Relations Review</i>	3	3.3	50.0
<i>Social Responsibility Journal</i>	3	3.3	53.3
<i>Business Communication Quarterly</i>	2	2.2	55.5
<i>Journal of Advertising</i>	2	2.2	57.8
<i>Journal of Corporate Citizenship</i>	2	2.2	60.0
<i>Management Research News</i>	2	2.2	62.2

Table III.
Main publication sources of CSR communication

Note: The next journal in the ranking has only one paper

The data show that the CSR communication field is indeed very fragmented, as observed by Ihlen *et al.* (2011). Ten journals contain more than 53 per cent of the CSR communication papers, and the percentage of those that appear in different journals only once is relatively high (47 per cent). Two main outlets that nevertheless seem to dominate the CSR communication literature and carry together 20 per cent of all papers are *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*.

Overview of the papers in this Special Issue

The present Special Issue on CSR communication, one of the few to cover this topic in a rather comprehensive selection of articles, tries to contribute to the enrichment of the CSR communication field and to enhance the value that CSR communication can have for the broader communication and management research. The five papers published in this Special Issue all demonstrate in their own ways that it is important to cherish the communication aspects of CSR and that communication should be considered as a vital part of CSR.

Building on the idea of CSR as a dynamic continuum of competing, communicatively negotiated meanings, future CSR research needs to continue analysing CSR through not only one, but several different perspectives – as a communication strategy, a communicative process or a specific outcome of communication. This Special Issue actually includes papers that represent these different categories we observed in our literature review. It closely mirrors the state of the broader CSR communication literature – three out of five papers (60 per cent versus 66.7 per cent in the literature) fit within the disclosure topics, one reflects the process of CSR communication and the last one deals with business-related outcomes and consequences of CSR communication.

The first paper, authored by Dennis Schoeneborn and Hannah Trittin, proposes to overcome the idea of CSR communication as transmission by acknowledging the constitutive role of communication for CSR. Starting from the basic tenets of “communication constitutes organisations” (CCO) thinking, the authors come to question the prevailing mechanistic package-like transfer of CSR information and meaning from sender to receiver. Applying the CCO view on CSR communication, the authors argue that CSR communication should be considered through the formative role of communication in organisations. They frame CSR communication as a complex process of meaning negotiation and draw an important conclusion: organisations should be seen as holistic and polyphonic entities and CSR communication should take into account non-human agency and responsibility as well. According to our classification schemes of the CSR communication literature so far, this paper overlaps with the process theme introducing new frameworks and communication models for CSR communication field. In terms of duality of understandings of CSR communication mentioned earlier, this paper clearly values the constructive potential of communication and can thus be categorised as a paper presenting the alternative view on CSR communication.

The second paper, authored by Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay, develops the idea of how, in the corporate CSR discourse, the internet is perceived as a pseudo-panopticon where corporations’ claims of CSR and their transparency is supposedly always being monitored. They argue that for stakeholders the internet as a pseudo-panopticon provides a rationale for suspending scepticism of CSR. However, their aim is to address this rationale by exploring the factors that indicate it might be a misguided belief. Their conclusion, based on the arguments for rejection of the instrumental focus of the CSR, is that there is a need to (further) encourage stakeholder scepticism toward the presumed transparency that dominates the corporate CSR discourse. In terms of our classification of the CSR communication literature, the article tackles the theme of disclosure and accountability and the sub-theme of characteristics of CSR communication media/genres. However, unlike the majority of papers in our

literature review, it does so in a critical way, trying to challenge the value of the instrumental notion of communication as a transmitter of CSR promotion.

The third paper, authored by Marcin Szweczyk and Elanor Colleoni, discusses the use and effects of different CSR communication strategies on organisational legitimacy in online environments. It focuses on the question of which strategies are able to create a bridge between the stakeholders' social perceptions of corporate responsibilities and the corporate CSR agenda, and consequently increase corporate legitimacy. The article is based on the premise that legitimacy, although socially constructed, is vital for survival of the organisations. This study's investigation is based on the CSR network community on Twitter, an interactive micro-blogging platform, and its actors, i.e. corporations, audiences and experts. With the help of data mining techniques, it analyses which are the communication strategies adopted by the corporations and whether these strategies lead to matching the corporate CSR agenda with stakeholders' social expectations. The research findings suggest that companies do not share a common audience public; rather, they tend to develop their own audiences. In addition, it is clear that corporations use self-centred and dialogical strategies in their communication to stakeholders. Comparing the two strategies in terms of the ability of alignment, it is evident that neither is able to establish a real convergence. The authors highlight the complexity of stakeholders' views and high ethical expectations towards CSR, which a company should be aware of in order to reach a real alignment with stakeholders. This paper can be categorised within the disclosure theme of our literature review, analysing different strategies of CSR communication.

The fourth paper, authored by Alan Pomeroy, Lester Johnson, and Gary Noble, offers a predominantly instrumental view on CSR communication studying how CSR messages are transmitted through advertising claims. Considering our classification of the CSR communication literature, this paper can be categorised in the main topic of disclosure and transparency inside the advertising sub-theme. The study is formed as an experiment researching how CSR information and commitment to CSR issues substantiate corporate CSR claims. By presenting the results of the study, authors confirm the fact that effective CSR communication might be rather elusive and that benefits of such communication may not be instantaneous. This is something companies should bear in mind when expecting results of their CSR communications. Despite this, however, many consumers are still rather unaware of CSR initiatives and some level of advertising clearly is needed. This seems especially important considering the results of the Cone 2010 Shared Responsibility Study, where the majority of American consumers (64 per cent) expect to be informed about corporate social/environmental programs via advertising (Cone Communications, 2010).

Finally, the paper by Claartje ter Hoeven and Joost Verhoeven offers an insight into the effects of CSR communication on internal stakeholders, who are often neglected in terms of CSR communication. This issue is researched in a quantitative study conducted among employees of a Dutch health-care insurance company. Their research is concerned with the effects of conveying CSR messages to employees. The premise is that of reciprocity – when an organisation values the well-being of its most important stakeholders, the employees, these employees might be more willing to commit themselves to the organisation. The authors argue that the link to higher commitment goes through communication, which increases employee awareness of CSR activities. Hence, as an implication of their study, the authors acknowledge the

importance of vertical communication in building awareness of CSR activities. However, through the motto “sharing is caring”, they implicitly acknowledge that CSR communication is a sphere where standards for CSR are articulated, developed and negotiated. Considering our classification of the literature, this article clearly falls within the category of outcomes/consequences that are business-related.

Final thoughts

The ideas and conclusions introduced by the authors in this Special Issue are all promising and challenging for the future research on CSR communication. The majority of papers in this Special Issue openly acknowledge the premise that CSR communication is not solely a mechanism through which corporate objectives are expressed and achieved, but rather a way through which they construct CSR and negotiate its meaning (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Christensen and Cheney, 2011). Although the transmission of CSR messages and its impacts should not be completely neglected in terms of CSR communication research, the fact is that the challenges the corporate world is facing regarding CSR issues often trigger attempts to decrease resistance among stakeholders, rather than seek genuine forms of participation and valuable decisional input (Deetz, 2007). The broadening of the CSR communication research in the three streams of disclosure/accountability, process and outcome/consequences, but moreover the intersection of these perspectives with each other allows us to better understand the institutionalisation of CSR communication, available strategies for CSR communication and opportunities and limitations for building reputation or legitimacy. Especially, the process perspective can highlight the role a range of external actors and (new) media play in the negotiation of corporate responsibility. It can contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities and complications that follow out of their different and partially incommensurable logics of actions, or the dynamics of their communications. Based on that, it can also highlight not only intended but also potentially dysfunctional effects of CSR communication, for instance, when CSR promises start producing stakeholder expectations instead of answering them. Although this constitutive perspective represented in this special issue is mainly focused on organisational communication, it gives us the opportunity to also reflect on the role of media, new media and media logics (e.g. Eisenegger and Schranz, 2011; Lee and Carroll, 2011). Future research needs to take this fundamental role of media for the societal construction of reality and responsibility expectations as well as the organisation of protest more into account. Whereas this Special Issue focuses primarily on CSR communication, future research also needs to develop the idea of CSR as communication further in order to contribute with this communicative view on CSR also to other research fields, such as management research or business ethics.

Besides documenting the need for stronger theoretical reflection on CSR communication in these three lenses, our segmentation finally also documents the need for more advanced methods and their combination. Whereas research on CSR communication is traditionally based on case studies or partially experimental research testing the consequences of different CSR strategies on recipients, more complex and combined analyses such as for example content analyses, social or semantic network analyses and time-series-analyses are necessary to observe CSR communication processes between organisations, (new) media and stakeholders in its

complexity. Hence, there is every reason to believe that researches will increasingly continue to study CSR communication through alternative lenses that challenge the prevailing instrumental view of CSR.

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