

“This is an excellent addition to the literature of communication surrounding corporate social responsibility in our digital age. It is an important pioneering work allowing authors with diverse disciplinary backgrounds to describe the state of the art (and science) in all its dimensions and what that state could and should look like in the future. Kudos are warranted for the editors and their contributors.”

—**Prof. Alex C. Michalos**, University of Northern British Columbia, Canada

“There is a continuous need to explore how organizations are communicating their socially responsible and sustainable behaviors to stakeholders. Therefore, this book provides a comprehensive guide to the extant theoretical underpinnings and empirical studies on corporate sustainability, social responsibility and ubiquitous digital media. I strongly recommend this book to academia and advanced undergraduate students in business and communications”

—**Dr. Mark Anthony Camilleri**, University of Malta

“This timely book contains cutting-edge thinking at the confluence of two virtually seismic forces transforming global business today: corporate social responsibility and digital media. Together, the twenty-one contributions from scholars worldwide not only edify the reader on the nuts and bolts of effective CSR communication in today’s hyper-connected media-saturated world but also challenge her to harness wisely the power of digital media in saving, literally, our planet and its people. In that, it is essential reading for every forward-looking business scholar and practitioner keen on optimizing business as a force for good.”

—**Professor Sankar Sen**, Zicklin School of Business, USA

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in the Digital Era

Although literature on corporate social responsibility is vast, research into the use and effectiveness of various communications through digital platforms about such corporate social responsibility is scarce. This gap is surprising; communicating about corporate social responsibility initiatives is vital to organizations that increasingly highlight their corporate social responsibility initiatives to position their corporate brands for both consumers and other stakeholders. Yet these organizations still sometimes rely on traditional methods to communicate, or even decide against communicating at all, because they fear triggering stakeholders' skepticism or cynicism. A systematic, interdisciplinary examination of corporate social responsibility communication through digital platforms, therefore, is necessary, to establish an essential definition and up-to-date picture of the field.

This *research anthology* addresses the above objectives. Drawing on marketing, management, and communication disciplines, among others, this anthology examines how organizations construct, implement, and use digital platforms to communicate about their corporate social responsibility and thereby achieve their organizational goals. The 21 chapters in this anthology reflect six main topic sections:

- Challenges and opportunities for communicating corporate social responsibility through digital platforms.
- Moving toward symmetry and interactivity in digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Fostering stakeholder engagement in and through digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Leveraging effective digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Digital activism and corporate social responsibility.
- Digital methodologies and corporate social responsibility.

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Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in the Digital Era

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For Camilla, Emma, and Benjamin, with all my love – Adam

For my sweet, little girls Victoria and Zazou, with all my love – Joëlle

**For Nicolas, Alexandre, and Filip, my favorite
half-brothers – François**

For Nathan – Rebecca

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Foreword and acknowledgements

Although literature on corporate social responsibility is vast, research into the use and effectiveness of various communications through digital platforms about such corporate responsibility is scarce. This gap is surprising; communicating about corporate social responsibility initiatives is vital to organizations that increasingly highlight their corporate social responsibility initiatives to position their corporate brands for both consumers and other stakeholders. Yet these organizations still sometimes rely on traditional methods to communicate, or even decide against communicating at all, because they fear triggering stakeholders' skepticism or cynicism.

A systematic, interdisciplinary examination of corporate social responsibility communication through digital platforms therefore is necessary, to establish an essential definition and up-to-date picture of the field. This examination ideally would

- Emphasize the role and use of corporate social responsibility communication through digital platforms;
- Outline key corporate social responsibility communications tactics, including social and environmental reporting, internationally recognized corporate social responsibility frameworks, and different means to involve stakeholders in two-way communication processes through digital platforms; and
- Examine the ultimate effectiveness of corporate social responsibility communication through digital platforms.

This *research anthology* addresses all of these objectives. Drawing on marketing, management, and communication disciplines, among others, this anthology examines how organizations construct, implement, and use digital platforms to communicate about their corporate social responsibility and thereby achieve their organizational goals.

The 21 chapters in this anthology reflect six main topic sections:

- Challenges and opportunities for communicating corporate social responsibility through digital platforms.
- Moving toward symmetry and interactivity in digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Fostering stakeholder engagement in and through digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Leveraging effective digital corporate social responsibility communication.
- Digital activism and corporate social responsibility.
- Digital methodologies and corporate social responsibility.

Challenges and opportunities for communicating corporate social responsibility through digital platforms

To start the first section, Sarah Glozer and Sally Hibbert contribute their chapter, “CSR engagement via social media: in theory and practice,” in which they examine practitioners’ views on and approaches to implementing corporate social responsibility communications through social media. Their primary focus is the extent to which corporate social responsibility communications can (and should) be integrated with marketing communications. To address these questions, they adopt an engagement lens that reveals three distinct perspectives on the integration of marketing with corporate social responsibility communications: avoidance, divergence, and convergence. Practitioners’ reasoning about their implementation of corporate social responsibility communications relates strongly to differences in the orientation of their marketing and corporate social responsibility business functions, as well as contextual factors linked to the organization and broader environment. Noting the growing prominence of social media as a communications platform, these authors call for further research into the implementation of social media communications at the marketing–corporate social responsibility interface to produce practical implications for practitioners.

The second chapter, “Unlocking corporate social responsibility communication through digital media” by Mark Anthony Camilleri, also acknowledges that businesses increasingly embrace the dynamics of new digital technologies as means to communicate their policies and responsible initiatives through corporate websites, social media platforms, and other interactive channels. If Web 2.0 is considered a vehicle for marketing laudable practices, including non–financial reporting, then measures from technological innovation and corporate social responsibility might combine to explicate the rationale for using digital media to communicate about environmental, social, and governance issues. This quantitative study of 202 retail owner-managers reveals a positive, significant relationship between the perceived ease of use/perceived usefulness of online media for corporate social responsibility disclosures and stakeholder engagement. In addition, younger respondents engage even more in these ubiquitous technologies. Therefore, corporate social responsibility communication is more effective when it is readily available online, offering various opportunities for businesses to enhance their reputations and images as they engage with different stakeholders through digital media.

Prashant Mishra and Madhupa Bakshi next consider the “Strategic imperatives of communicating corporate social responsibility through digital media: an emerging market perspective.” Based on interviews with senior corporate social responsibility and corporate communication executives in medium to large, public- and private-sector firms in the emerging market of India, these authors investigate the rationale for the use of digital media to communicate corporate social responsibility initiatives. It also explores the strategic imperative for digital outreach. The findings indicate that digital media for corporate social responsibility can mobilize stakeholders meaningfully. Strategically, such communication in the digital domain also can contribute to brand growth and cohesiveness among stakeholders.

Asserting that “‘The Devil’s in the details’: contested standards of corporate social responsibility in social media,” Robert L. Heath, Adam J. Saffer, and Damion Waymer note that of the various approaches to corporate social responsibility communications, one of them views the discourse as a dialogic contest, with contextually relevant levels of corporate social responsibility and strategies. The unique structural and functional networks of social

media facilitate discourse, because many voices express different, conflicting judgments of corporate social responsibility, without gatekeeping. The network connections provide conduits through which discourse flows, but they also can build siloes in which identities and opinions form and get reinforced. Accordingly, textual and visual messages, which create simulated realities, can reframe disputed issues of policy and reputation. With three cases, this chapter emphasizes how social media reveals “the devil in the details,” because competing voices add authenticity and transparency to corporate social responsibility discourses. A Netflix case reveals how one concerned person can pressure a company to raise its corporate social responsibility performance; a pork producers’ reputation case focuses on pig waste as an environmental and animal health issue, together with the humane crating of sows, which generates debates and marketing challenges; and an IRATE 8 case demonstrates how students can take over established social media networks and use their networks to pressure a university to respond to an emotional issue.

Moving toward symmetry and interactivity in digital corporate social responsibility communication

In this section, Urša Golob and Klement Podnar start by “Exploring corporate social responsibility communication patterns in social media: a review of current research.” Their chapter focuses on growing literature on corporate social responsibility communication in social media and explores how this particular topic has been studied and presented previously. The review of papers indexed in the Scopus database is thematic in its organization, using a co-word and co-citation approach to determine the main themes and research foci. An idealistic perception of social media with regard to corporate social responsibility communication is the starting point for most empirical research; however, an overview of published empirical evidence suggests that the reality is not necessarily in line with this dialogic “ideal.” The theoretical underpinnings of corporate social responsibility communication in social media thus might benefit from a more realistic view of the power of social media, as a platform for symmetrical, two-way corporate social responsibility communication.

In the second chapter in this section, Ralph Tench and Mavis Avo-Mensah proclaim “The death of transmission models of corporate social responsibility communication,” with their finding that the rapid rise of new technologies has rendered transmission modes of communication out of date. This chapter therefore highlights the relevance of constitutive approaches and their relationship with corporate social responsibility communication; the observed trends in web-based corporate social responsibility communication research also suggest a dialogic construction. With an exploratory study in Ghana, these authors demonstrate the practical challenges that companies face with regard to their use of modern methods of communication. The insights derived from this research imply that companies should redesign their corporate social responsibility communication strategies and adapt to new technologies by leveraging the novel opportunities that they create for stakeholder engagement.

The third chapter in this section, “Social media: from asymmetric to symmetric communication of corporate social responsibility” by Swaleha Peeroo, Martin Samy, and Brian Jones, suggests organizations already have adopted social media as a cost-effective corporate communication tool that can add value through the use of interactive platforms. However, the shift from asymmetric to symmetric communication, facilitated by social media, represents both opportunities and threats to corporations and stakeholders, including the

wider public. For example, with the expansion of the social web, business reputation no longer is solely the responsibility of a corporate team. This new era of “socialcasting” allows empowered stakeholders to enhance or damage corporate reputations easily, due to the polyphony of corporate social responsibility on social media. Despite the interactive capacity of social media, companies still mainly apply a broadcasting strategy for their corporate social responsibility communication though, such that they are missing some benefits of social media, such as symmetrical communication and relationship building.

In their chapter, Zhifeng Chen and Haiming Hang assert that for “Communication corporate social responsibilities in the digital media: interactivity is key.” With a thematic review of previous research, these authors consider whether the interactive nature of digital media allows organizations to engage more fully with stakeholders, which could transform the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility communication. According to this review, organizations mainly engage in one-way communication on digital media, focused on disseminating their corporate social responsibility information, rather than fully engaging with stakeholders. Extant literature also is unbalanced, dominated by descriptive research that details how organizations communicate about their corporate social responsibility in digital media. Few studies examine the impact of interactivity though. Noting the existing conceptualizations of interactivity in marketing, information systems, and media studies, the authors criticize the failure to address the multidimensional nature of interactivity and also call for further research into the implications of this multidimensional nature of interactivity for transforming corporate social responsibility communication in digital media.

Fostering stakeholder engagement in and through digital corporate social responsibility communication

Moving on to studies of how to foster stakeholder engagement, Keith J. Perks, Mónica Recalde Viana, Francisca Farache, and Jana Kollat offer “A critical reflection on the role of dialogue in communicating ethical corporate social responsibility through digital platforms.” Recognizing that organizations are under increasing pressure to communicate their positions while more critical citizens expand their uses of digital platforms to express their opinions, the authors argue that these changes demand a corporate culture of listening, management commitment, responsible action, and more effective corporate social responsibility communication with stakeholders. Digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide a mechanism for dialogue with stakeholders, yet despite its potential for helping corporations listen and respond to stakeholder concerns in an open and honest discourse, such communication often is perceived to serve only instrumental goals. If corporate social responsibility communication through digital platforms was grounded in the ethical premise of responsibility and the concept of dialogue, it could change this perception. This chapter recommends that organizations should enact an ethical premise by adopting a dialogic mind-set in which they listen and respond to the views of stakeholders. This critical reflection also suggests a conceptual lens for continued empirical studies.

To examine the interaction of corporate social responsibility with public relations and other forms of professional communication, Isabel Ruiz-Mora and Jairo Lugo-Ocando contribute “The imperative needs of dialogue between corporate social responsibility departments and PR practitioners: empirical evidence from Spain.” The authors investigate the top listed companies in Spain, which also have invested more resources in corporate social responsibility than other firms in that country. To triangulate the data,

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they combine semi-structured interviews with analyses of annual reports, communication strategies, and digital ethnographic observations of digital platforms (websites and social networks). The findings suggest the scarcity of public relations practitioners responsible for formulating or communicating corporate social responsibility policies in major Spanish companies, whether in digital or non-digital spaces. Thus, an important gap exists: corporate social responsibility departments recognize their communication needs, but they fail to acknowledge the ability of their communication colleagues to address these needs. The resulting communication strategies are peripheral, performative exercises in the organization, rather than core elements of the corporate social responsibility strategy.

In the next contribution, Augustine Pang, Angela Mak, and Wonsun Shin consider the potential pitfalls of relying on the mainstream media as a sole agent and engine of corporate social responsibility communication, with their chapter “Integrated corporate social responsibility communication: toward a model encompassing media agenda building with stakeholder dialogic engagement.” Therefore, they integrate research that suggests digital media (online, mobile, and social) are critical platforms for organizations to not just disseminate information but also interact with stakeholders through feedback or dialogic loops. Organizations can integrate their media agenda building with stakeholder engagement, using both mainstream media and digital platforms to communicate their corporate social responsibility activities, according to the corporate social responsibility – integrated media model that the authors propose.

Christian Fieseler, Kateryna Maltseva, and Christian Pieter Hoffmann advance the notion that corporate efforts to engage stakeholders in social, ecological, and governmental issues are unbalanced and unrepresentative, such that they are dominated by elite users, with their chapter “Hedonic stakeholder engagement: bridging the online participation gap through gamification.” Therefore, they propose lower-threshold modes of participation to enlarge the potential circle of contributors, based on hedonic gratification as opposed to the more common utilitarian motives mostly employed today. Using input from gamification research, the authors investigate narrative-, reward-, and technology-enabled elements as worthwhile routes to corporate online stakeholder engagement. Although challenges remain for gamifying corporate social responsibility efforts, the benefits of speaking to a larger stakeholder base and familiarizing them with corporate social responsibility policies and deliberations through gamified approaches, are substantial as well.

Leveraging effective digital corporate social responsibility communication

The first contribution in this section, “Social media concepts for effective corporate social responsibility online communication,” is by Lina M. Gómez, who notes that social media platforms provide interactive richness for two-way conversations, yet communication on these platforms still tends to be treated as a one-way approach. Of the many empirical studies of corporate social responsibility communication and social media, none has discussed the importance of using social media concepts for interactive corporate social responsibility communication, including dialogue, engagement, transparency, authenticity, influence, and mobilization. By considering how these innate social media concepts have been used by various entities that communicate about social responsibility issues on Twitter (e.g., companies, media, non-profits, influencers, advocates, professionals, citizens/consumers), according to a quantitative content analysis of a random sample of 1,000 public

tweets that feature the hashtag “#CSR,” the author reveals that social media platforms can engage stakeholders to commit to responsible practices. However, some users do not leverage all the unique elements that these platforms have to offer. The proposed corporate social responsibility communication framework can help managers design effective messages to promote stakeholder engagement and participation.

Next, Shuili Du and Kun Yu propose a contingency model in their chapter, “Effectiveness and accountability of digital corporate social responsibility communication: a contingency model.” By drawing on different literature streams pertaining not only to corporate social responsibility but also institutional legitimacy, digital communication, and accountability, this chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the unique characteristics of digital corporate social responsibility communication, the array of techniques managers could employ to enhance the effectiveness of such communication, and metrics they can use to assess the accountability of their digital corporate social responsibility communication. Rich media, encouraging interactivity, and active participation by stakeholders emerge as critical to digital corporate social responsibility communication. Yet the effectiveness of digital corporate social responsibility communication also is contingent on several factors, including the accessibility of the corporate social responsibility message, media richness, level of stakeholder participation, and the perceived credibility of the messages. Accountability also is a critical issue; this chapter accordingly outlines several corporate social responsibility – related, stakeholder-related, and firm performance – related metrics that managers should monitor continuously to gauge the accountability of their digital corporate social responsibility communications.

The next chapter, by Claudia E. Henninger and Caroline J. Oates, instead considers “The role of social media in communicating corporate social responsibility within fashion micro organizations.” That is, this chapter investigates how sustainable fashion micro-organizations understand and communicate about their corporate social responsibility activities through digital platforms, with a particular focus on social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs. The qualitative research, based on semi-structured interviews, semiotics, and Twitterfeed analyses, provides insights into three micro-organizations. The findings suggest that though social media has an increasingly important role for promoting a company’s products and services, not all platforms are appropriate for communicating about corporate social responsibility activities. Blogs emerge as valuable means to gain stakeholder engagement, which allow organizations to communicate their corporate social responsibility activities to a wider audience.

The last chapter in this section, by Ezgi Akpınar, discusses “Corporate social responsibility and word of mouth: a systematic review and synthesis of literature.” Given the era of more connected consumers, it has become much more important for companies to take advantage of word of mouth for their corporate social responsibility. Positive word of mouth (e.g., sending a viral video to collect donation, talking about a social cause to raise awareness) can benefit companies. On the other hand, negative word of mouth (e.g., sending news about a product harm crisis, talking about environmental concerns about production facilities) can harm companies’ status greatly. This chapter presents a systematic review and synthesis of corporate social responsibility and word of mouth literature based on 71 studies. The chapter explores 1) the role of potential drivers that could make corporate social responsibility activities propagate, 2) the consequences of corporate social responsibility activities in terms of word of mouth, and 3) the role of four components of communication (sender, receiver, content and channel) that could make corporate social responsibility activities propagate.

Digital activism and corporate social responsibility

Three chapters focus on digital activism. First, Vidhi Chaudri and Asha Kaul contribute “Digital activism: NGOs leveraging social media to influence/challenge corporate social responsibility.” They note how extant scholarship privileges a managerial perspective and situates corporations as key actors in business–society relations, without including non-profit organizations as influential institutional actors. This gap may not be surprising, considering the managerial bias in corporate social responsibility scholarship and the unequal, often hostile relationship among corporations and non-profit organizations. Yet the growing influence of social media and the digitalization of communication represent game changers, so this chapter uses illustrative cases to discover how traditionally marginalized stakeholders (e.g., NGOs) leverage new social media to effect change. Traditional forms of activism may persist, but the uncensored, instantaneous, widespread reach of new media amplify stakeholder concerns and offer unprecedented potential for collective action. In turn, advocacy groups gain a new source of leverage and new opportunities to be heard and noticed. These social-mediated developments suggest several ethical and pragmatic implications.

Second, Majia Nadesan investigates a notable industrial crisis in “Catastrophe, transparency, and social responsibility on online platforms: contesting cold shutdown at the Fukushima nuclear plant.” To determine whether social media activism can increase democratic responsiveness and corporate social responsibility, this chapter focuses on the March 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. With participatory action research, the author examines whether social media successfully challenged TEPCO’s narrative of control regarding reactor conditions, using corporate webcam and government radiation monitoring data. The analysis of webcam watchers’ efforts to contest official accounts of a “cold shutdown” reveal two specific time periods, which are significant for coinciding with TEPCO’s reassurances that the fuel had cooled, despite unusual activity on the webcams.

Third, Angela Mak and Suwichit Chaidaroon consider the situation surrounding another tragic event, the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, in “Plotting corporate social responsibility narratives: corporate social responsibility stories by global fashion brands after the collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh.” Many global fashion brands that had outsourced to Bangladesh’s garment factories initiated corporate social responsibilities to help victims and local communities, as well as to restore their brand images, considering that they arguably were responsible. Two interrelated textual analysis approaches examine the corporate social responsibility videos of involved fashion brands. First, an analysis of narrative plots and characters identifies how heroes and dilemmas (or social issues) are framed. Second, a multimodal discourse analysis reveals how meanings are constructed and made salient through multimodal features. Three distinct narrative patterns emerge among the corporate social responsibility stories told by fashion brands involved directly in Rana Plaza (wrongdoers), brands that were not involved directly (malefactors), and brands that were not involved at all (heroes). These interpretations suggest that digital media serve as a multimodal communication platform for corporate social responsibility narratives and reach their maximum dramatic effect from constructing heroes and framing the dilemmas that the Bangladeshi victims faced, especially when the narratives are authentic, transparent, and engaging.

Digital methodologies and corporate social responsibility

The final section contains two chapters. Edward T. Vieira Jr. and Susan Grantham suggest “A new content analysis methodology appropriate for corporate social responsibility communication.” A text network analysis approach may complement traditional content

analysis methods by distilling content into a more manageable amount of text and providing a textual structure. In addition, text network analysis is unsupervised and employs network analysis betweenness centrality and degree principles to identify influential words and word clusters. With this information, various content analysis strategies can be applied, including analyses that incorporate individual and contextual-related nontextual factors. Furthermore, text network analysis is informed by the landscape model of reading comprehension, which is a reader-focused framework. Because text network analysis is unsupervised, it is not very labor intensive or time consuming. Finally, text network analysis provides a graphical visualization and overview of the entire text, indicating keywords and themes. The authors illustrate the proposed approach by analyzing corporate social responsibility introductory letters written in 2002 and 2012 by the ExxonMobil CEO.

Finally, Ana Adi considers the emerging discourses and themes associated with the corporate social responsibility hashtag on Twitter as a way to discover concerns, issues, and key conceptual associations in “#CSR on Twitter: a hashtag oversimplifying a complex practice.” The sample of 15,000 tweets collected over three different periods (23–29 August 2015, 14–21 December 2015, and 23–29 January 2016) reveals automatically reported hashtag frequencies, most active and most influential accounts, a user network visualization, and hashtag network visualization. The resulting conceptual associations indicate that tweets referring to #CSR include information relevant to the profession and the field, which often is reiterated, repeated, and repackaged across a few accounts responsible for the greatest bulk of information. The corporate social responsibility hashtag also is closely associated with #sustainability, #green, and #jobs, suggesting that wider approaches to corporate social responsibility receive less attention and support than the triple bottom line approach that centers specifically on people, planet, and profit. This trend misleads users into associating corporate social responsibility primarily with profit-enhancing and environment-saving (or maybe just greenwashing) practices.

Closing remarks

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We hope that this compendium of chapters and themes stimulates and contributes to the ongoing debate surrounding the optimal communication of corporate social responsibility in an ever-more digitalized world. The chapters in this book can help fill some knowledge gaps, while also stimulating further thought and action pertaining to the multiple aspects surrounding communication through digital means.

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3.1 A critical reflection on the role of dialogue in communicating ethical CSR through digital platforms

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Introduction

Organizations are under increasing pressure to communicate to stakeholders their position and policies on social responsibility, informing them about the corporation's good intentions and actions. This pressure has intensified in a global context marked by constant change and whereby more critical, demanding citizens using emerging new technologies. This context has been cited by the Melbourne Mandate of the Global Alliance (MMGA)¹ as signaling a need for changes in organizational approaches to CSR communication. The changes, according to the MMGA, demand a corporate culture of listening, management commitment and responsible action if organizations are to retain or restore their social legitimacy. Hence corporations' dissemination and communication of CSR information needs more effective forms of engagement with stakeholders through symmetrical relations.² In initiating a two-way symmetrical dialogue with stakeholders, organizations have an opportunity to understand their perspective, respond to criticism³ and reduce stakeholder scepticism.⁴ Dialogue is "a process in which parties with different interests and values at stake in a particular issue work together towards mutually acceptable solutions".⁵ Thus, a dialogue is essential for someone or an entity to speak and listen to the thoughts, opinions and responding to the interlocutor to meet the ethical premise for responsibility.⁶ The emergence of digital hardware and software platforms such as Facebook or Twitter provides managers with mechanisms that have the potential for a dialogue with stakeholders to communicate their CSR initiatives and policies. These digital platforms allow managers and corporations to listen and respond to stakeholders and their concerns in an open and honest discourse. Through this connection of digital platforms and dialogue, corporations have an opportunity to meet the ethical premise of responsibility. On the other hand, the notion that digital platforms are an opportunity for organizations to interact with stakeholders, transforming a passive observer into an active participant, has been challenged.⁷ Rather, in this view, digital platforms result not in interactivity but interpassivity (a combination of interactive and passive), and the illusion of being empowered, which is, however, a deferral of the interaction to the device or the digital platform to act or interact on our behalf with the participation of an automated 'like' or 'dislike' response rather than a dialogue. This critique suggests that digital platforms are the mechanism but not the foundation for an ethical premise for CSR whereby people and entities participate in an active dialogue. Given this critique, we probe whether or not organizations are able to satisfy and enact the ethical premise of CSR. Our contextual emphasis is on the potential for implementing the ethical premise of CSR in large organizations, which due to more scrutiny by governments, NGOs and other publics, are more likely to use a wide

range of one-way or two-way interactive tools to communicate their corporate social responsibility to a varied audience.⁸

To achieve the central aim of the chapter, we explore the ethical premise of responsibility and its connection to the concept of dialogue as a basis for assessing if, how and why digital platforms can or cannot meet the ethical premise and dialogic prerequisite for CSR. We then discuss the implications and make recommendations for implementing the ethical premise of CSR into an organization. In the first section of the chapter, we define and clarify the ethical premise of CSR.

The ethical premise of CSR

According to Gibb, responsibility is asymmetric because I, nor another party, can be held responsible for the actions of each other and “this ethics requires me to respond for the actions of others, actions I could neither cause nor control”.⁹ The ethical premise for responsibility rests not only on entering a discourse but that I also listen and expose myself to the other person. “In discourse I expose myself to the interrogation of the Other Person and this urgency of response – the sharp point of the present – engenders me for responsibility”.¹⁰ Ethical responsibility comes from someone or an entity listening to the thoughts and opinions and responding to the interlocutor – “we listen in order to gain responsibility; by making ourselves vulnerable to questioning, we become responsible”.¹¹ Habermas¹² extends the ethical premise of responsibility to a discourse among all those affected “in a cooperative search for truth, in which they may come to the conclusion by the force of a better argument . . . on which rests the fundamental principle of discourse ethics”. The capacity to listen, a sense of openness and being vulnerable to questioning and responsiveness necessitates establishing a moral legitimacy of conforming to the norms of society through a deliberative discourse with internal and external publics.¹³ In the corporate context, moral legitimacy is where stakeholders’ views reflect a normative and positive evaluation of a corporation and its activities on the basis of what they see as the “right thing to do”¹⁴ as an outcome of “explicit public discussion”.¹⁵ Corporations bear the political responsibilities¹⁶ through discourse in the four Habermasian validity claims of communicative action, which are truth, sincerity, understandability and appropriateness. Further, discourse also meets the political CSR criteria of open discourse, participation, transparency and accountability.¹⁷

In the next section, we discuss CSR communication theory, the connection of the concept of dialogue with the ethical premise of responsibility.

CSR communication theory, dialogue and the ethical premise

Organizations signal their economic, social and environmental initiatives through CSR communication,¹⁸ which is a tool to enhance their corporate and public image¹⁹ and to gain legitimacy and support from different stakeholder groups.²⁰ Here we define stakeholders as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives”,²¹ who are located internally (owners, managers, employees) or externally (government, competitors, customers, consumer advocates, environmentalists, media, NGOs, and activists). Companies use a range of channels in their CSR communication with stakeholders, such as social reports, codes of conduct, CSR websites, stakeholder consultations, internal channels, awards and events, cause-related marketing, product packaging, advertising and its own social media channels.²² Further, interactive

CSR communication, allowing for stakeholder involvement in a common setting of a CSR agenda with organizations, contributes to a feeling of self-enhancement and the belief that companies engage in CSR for responsible and societal reasons.²³ For external stakeholders', independent media coverage of CSR is more credible than what corporations say about their CSR initiatives,²⁴ as such information helps them to make a balanced assessment and gain a sense of an organizations social responsibility claims.²⁵ Proactive CSR communication strategies use expert opinion, third party endorsements and substantiation in the form of CSR investments, for example, financial and in-kind contributions, or employee volunteering, have been found to mitigate the levels of perceived hypocrisy in a reactive strategy.²⁶

While organizations have made use of such policies to gain legitimacy, a few have gone further to embed the ethical premise of CSR into their core mission. This has been achieved through listening to and having an open, honest conversation with stakeholders and responding to their concerns. This requires corporations to adopt a 'dialogic mindset'²⁷ to express a manifestation of inner thoughts and exploration of understanding each other which is "itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique or format". Dialogue transcends the view that is limited to particular interests and endeavors to seek for "a persistent effort to reach the truth"²⁸ "whereby parties with different interests and values at stake on a particular issue work together towards mutually acceptable solutions".²⁹ This we argue, is a fundamental element of the ethical premise of responsibility connecting dialogue and ethical CSR.

A pioneer in and exemplar of the dialogic 'conversational corporation'³⁰ and participatory approaches before the emergence of digital platforms was the Body Shop. Their Social Statement 95 was "one of the most sensitive in feeding stakeholder concerns into the design of the survey and other dialogic tools".³¹ There are several decades of experience in developing participatory approaches, which pass through evolutionary stages in a laddering from 'dialogue shifts' at the bottom to higher levels "that involves the exploration, appreciation and in some instances acceptance of the interests of others".³² Achieving an effective dialogue at the higher levels requires a shift from a give-and-take debate to one of dialogue and learning, which leads to understanding something differently and an evolution of purpose beyond what is currently possible. For example, the Body Shop's definition of stakeholder dialogue is "a genuine process of sharing each other's perspectives with a view to tackling a joint issue. It assumes you are willing to change your views. It is the spirit of seeking out and valuing the views of others".³³ As digital platforms are widely acknowledged as an interactive media, there is potential to use them as a mechanism for a dialogue, in a participatory communication process³⁴ to meet the ethical premise for CSR, which we explore in the next section.

Digital platforms as a dialogical mechanism for the ethical premise of CSR

Digital platforms such as blogs, Facebook, wikis, Twitter or Instagram³⁵ enable users to interact and connect with each through user-generation, information sharing, and collaboration. Corporations, including Ford, have set up corporate CSR blogs to engage with opinion leaders on the issue of sustainability; McDonald's manages a blog whereby employees blog and respond to users' comments openly and transparently, which is highly interactive;³⁶ Starbucks uses a Twitter account to respond to consumers CSR comments; and Cisco Systems focus on NGOs, with CSR bloggers using a Twitter account created to

engage with highly interested stakeholders.³⁷ However, while corporate blogs encourage a dialogue, it is dedicated to a corporation's key constituents with the purpose of informing and persuading them.³⁸ Other digital platforms, such as wikis, which are administered and edited by any user, mean that the corporation is not in control of who participates (for example, see Apple www.apple.wikia.com).³⁹ However, such dialogue-based blogs face the criticism that they are instrumental, company-centric and biased, rather than deliberative and largely conducted with groups of experts or individuals rather than a wider audience.⁴⁰ Despite this view, the exploration of digital platforms as a dialogic medium has intensified in the literature on public relations and corporate communication over the course of the last ten years.⁴¹ To date there has been a focus on two approaches: one is the dissemination of information, and the other is the generation of a dialogue between the different publics and the organization.⁴² In the first approach, the level of interactivity is low, and a digital platform is used as a monological mechanism to communicate fixed information to influence the image of the company amongst its various publics.⁴³ In the second approach, a digital platform has the potential to be a mechanism for an organizational dialogue to maintain an open-ended conversation with the public. Further, it is also a space where stakeholders have opportunities to share their opinions about corporate initiatives, decisions and activities. Hence, digital platforms have the potential to be a mechanism for a dialogue discourse between the organization and its different stakeholders if the discourse is based on openness, listening, responding and a change in ideas,⁴⁴ which is the ethical premise of CSR.

Despite examples of organizations engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders about CSR issues, extant research depicts a situation whereby organizations are practicing a one-way transmission, public information and transactional model of communication.⁴⁵ In taking this approach, organizations are not opening an opportunity for dialogue with the public;⁴⁶ instead they are using digital platforms for dissemination purposes.⁴⁷ Posting content on digital platforms “does not mean that those contents created conversations among the followers of organizations’ social media, or that organizations have a dialogue or, still less a relationship with their followers”, rather “conversations emerge as a result of sharing information that arouses interest in someone, but also from the presentation of content that stimulate an individuals’ interest and curiosity, or that simply respond to information-seeking needs”.⁴⁸ Neither conversations, nor two-way communications, can take place if individuals do not create, share content, or respond to existing content with comments. In digital platforms, information is available from the moment it is created and often transmitted by the participants themselves or by eyewitnesses. This acceleration has driven organizations, advised by digital agencies, to respond to comments immediately with limited time for reflection. Such an approach may not establish the basis for a CSR dialogue with stakeholders, as it places a greater emphasis on response than responsibility.⁴⁹

Digital platforms, which are not administered and set up by corporations, have three main characteristics: the de-institutionalization of communication, the evolution of users as producers, and interactivity in networks.⁵⁰ Digital platforms can, in this context, empower users to create and filter content according to their own interests and share them within their own networks. Through digital platforms, organizations have the opportunity to communicate directly and mutually with their stakeholders⁵¹ in an involvement strategy,⁵² changing the landscape for organizational communication of CSR which:

sketches an inherent double-sidedness in user participation and associated patterns and values of ‘produsage’ in social media: the user is simultaneously an empowered, productive agent.⁵³

As a first step, organizations can use digital platforms to deliver information to their relevant stakeholder groups as they are actively looking for it,⁵⁴ and that “the thirst for information facilitated by digital platforms asks for more ongoing and regular engagement in CSR will expose business to a much more direct and visible scrutiny by the general public”.⁵⁵ Through a lack of transparency and substantial information in communication, an organization could face accusations of greenwashing, spread virally in a short space of time. Consequently, organizations are under more pressure to be socially responsible in digital platforms,⁵⁶ resulting in decreasing organizational power to control public opinion.⁵⁷ The diversity of digital platforms fragments audiences, making it difficult for organizations to identify and engage with relevant interest groups.⁵⁸ Conversely, digital platforms give stakeholders access to information they could not reach before,⁵⁹ and organizations may establish a much more intense and interactive CSR communication network with them, resulting in higher levels of belief in the commitment to CSR activities.⁶⁰ But organizations tend to use digital platforms like other mass communication channels and mainly distribute information in a one-way communication approach.⁶¹ Interactivity levels of digital CSR communication are generally low, as organizations behave passively on digital platforms and only react when directly addressed.⁶² Furthermore, higher levels of corporate dialogue do not necessarily lead to diverse networks with high densities of dialogue about CSR; instead, organizations tend to develop their own audiences fostering an interest in specific organizational content.⁶³ Research to evaluate three communication strategies (information, response, involvement)⁶⁴ in the context of digital platforms identified the three strategies used on Twitter as broadcasting, reactive and engagement, revealing that most organizations follow a broadcasting strategy and only few communicate according to the engagement strategy.

We argue that for corporations to meet the ethical premise for CSR set out in our chapter, organizations have to adopt new approaches in their communication processes to remove the conditions of structural power⁶⁵ by taking a deliberative approach towards CSR communication, meaning “consideration, discussion, and weighting of ideas with multiple actors (in digital platforms) implies a balance of power of actors involved and democratic will formation based on ethical discourse combined with economic bargaining”.⁶⁶ Thus, deliberative CSR communication is seen less as an instrument of organizational self-serving goals but more of a situation where “people organize collectively to regulate or transform some aspects of their social conditions, along with the communicative activities in which they try to persuade one another to join such collective actions or decide which direction they wish to take”.⁶⁷ The deliberative rather than the instrumental approach is a more appropriate basis for meeting the ethical premise (capacity to listen, sense of openness, being vulnerable to questioning and responsiveness) for CSR communication in digital platforms. However, not all digital “tools of CSR communication take into account . . . the normative demands of open discourse”.⁶⁸

While digital platforms are a potential mechanism for establishing a dialogic discourse with others in order to meet the ethical premise of CSR, other factors have to be taken into consideration, which we discuss in the next section.

Implications: meeting the ethical premise of CSR communication in digital platforms

In our introduction to this chapter, we argued that while there was potential for digital platforms to satisfy the conditions of the ethical premise of CSR, other factors have to be taken into consideration. Organizations using digital platforms for automated CSR

messages to stakeholders without recognising the importance of a dialogical mind-set at the top management level will, we argue, fail to meet the requirements for the ethical premise of CSR. While there are instances of where corporations are willing to hold an open and responsive dialogue with a wider audience, digital platforms as a mechanism for establishing the ethical premise for CSR and how such an approach could be adopted in organizations is still unclear.⁶⁹ Prior research suggests that stakeholders are sceptical about the CSR efforts of organizations seeing this as part of an attempt to appear responsible while continuing to practice irresponsibility.⁷⁰ If organizations are genuinely interested in overcoming such scepticism, top managers need to re-think their approach towards CSR communication through embracing a spirit of openness, dialogue and responsiveness to establish an ethical premise of responsibility set out in this chapter. Digital platforms provide a basis for ethical CSR, in a dialogue and response communication between the corporation and its stakeholders. Achieving this goal is a significant challenge for organizations and communication managers who adopt an instrumental digital CSR communication approach of information dissemination rather than a dialogical and response approach. Organizations are, understandably, reluctant to open up dialogues with stakeholders to expose the corporation in all their areas of business. However, they need to respond, as digital platforms are exposing corporations to high levels of scrutiny beyond their control. A proactive approach acknowledging that mistakes are made in their business operations and communicating and discussing these issues through digital platforms signals a serious attempt to listen and respond to criticism.

There are, however, no easy solutions, single schemas or ‘dashboards’ to be offered to meet the requirements of the ethical premise of CSR. However, digital platforms in conjunction with setting specific CSR objectives, and managers adopting a dialogic mind-set, listening to the view of others about their concerns on a specific issue would fulfil the ethical premise of responsibility. As a starting point for our recommendations, we propose that communication managers address two fundamental questions they need to consider and answer, which are:

- 1 *To what extent do we as an organization and management team believe in the ethical premise of CSR that by listening to the thoughts, opinions and responding to the interlocutor – ‘we listen in order to gain responsibility; by making ourselves vulnerable to questioning, we become responsible’?*
- 2 *If we accept this ethical premise, are we willing to incorporate it into our strategy and organizational practices?*

If managers believe in the ethical premise of CSR and are willing to introduce this into their organizational practices, then the next step is how would this approach be implemented?

It is to this question that we now turn to make practical recommendations for implementing an ethical premise of CSR in an organization. In Table 3.1.1, we summarise our recommendations into five stages. In stage 1, we recommend that organizations take into consideration structural issues, such as who would be responsible and at what levels? In our judgement to achieve the ethical premise of CSR, there has to be a commitment to a digital platform as mechanism for a dialogic listening and responding approach at the top management level. This could mean allocation of responsibility to an existing communication director or if there is no appropriate board member to recruit externally. Whoever is delegated or recruited would need to have the appropriate sensitivity and commitment to the ethical premise of a dialogic listening and response mind-set. Further,

Table 3.1.1 Recommendations for implementing the ethical premise of CSR into an organization⁷¹

Stage 1: Structural considerations – who would be responsible for implementing an ethically based digital CSR approach and at what level(s)? Inclusion of ethical intrapreneurs – brokers between the inside and outside of the organization.
Stage 2: Inclusiveness – who is to be included in the digital CSR dialogue?
Stage 3: What would be the most appropriate digital platform?
Stage 4: Responsiveness – degree to which the various stakeholder parties respond to the dialogue (not exclusively internal parties).
Stage 5: Outcomes – what actually happens as a consequence of the dialogue?

the communication director should also have an understanding of how this dialogue with stakeholders would be deployed through digital platforms. The director of communication would then be responsible for taking this strategy forward with the communication manager and their team. If outside expertise in the area of digital platforms is lacking, then the organization should recruit people with the necessary skills and experience into the team. The communication director, manager and their team would need to ensure that the policy and approach continues to have the attention of the board members and has ‘political’ weight at the top level. A corporate wide commitment to ethical CSR should be diffused and cascaded to employees through internal events and meetings to embed the approach into the practices of the organization. We also recommend that as digital platforms span and blur the lines between the organization and the external environment that an ethical intrapreneur be identified. This would be someone within the organization who would act as a ‘broker’, taking direct responsibility for initiatives to sustain the ethical premise of CSR through a dialogic discourse with the stakeholders. Further, we would recommend an organization develops a systematic cooperation with groups who represent the central CSR issues facing the corporation who are situated outside of the organization.⁷² In stage 2, we recommend connecting the specific CSR issue and objective to the identification of the appropriate stakeholders with which to have a dialogue.

In stage 2, ‘decisions’ would have to be made as to which stakeholders would be included in the CSR dialogue. We recommend primary research to identify the specific stakeholders and the levels of their involvement with CSR, such as lobby groups, forums, individuals, and the areas and societal issues where they have the most involvement and motivation. This same exercise would be carried out with internal employee stakeholders. We recommend this approach so that organizations would be able to have some initial scope and boundaries to launch and implement the ethical premise for CSR in digital platforms. This can then be extended in an iterative and dynamic manner in response to events and issues that occur in their business environment.

In stage 3, we recommend an audit is carried out to determine how and why stakeholders use digital platforms to select the most appropriate means of communication and digital platforms for different stakeholders and levels of engagement.

Stages 4 and 5 are essential for the implementation of the ethical premise of CSR, as there should be a response from an individual or entity as the basis for a dialogue. Whilst stakeholders may have the intention to respond, this may not occur with a high degree of frequency and intensity. Therefore, we recommend that organizations use a hybrid of digital platforms and offline communications through meetings and events, inside and outside of the organization with stakeholders to stimulate interest and intensity of dialogue. Stage 5

is where the organization has to demonstrate to stakeholders that they have listened to and made changes in response to the dialogue. This could take many forms, in terms of, for example, organizational change, initiatives and actions.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to examine and probe the ethical premise of CSR communication, which requires a corporation to listen to and respond to the questioning of an interlocutor in a dialogue. The emergence of digital platforms has changed the landscape of CSR communication from one in which the corporation is in control of the communication through dissemination of information to stakeholders, to one wherein stakeholders communicate with each other out of the control of organizations. In this more open environment organizations are challenged and questioned about their CSR performance and called upon to respond through digital platforms. In this new, challenging environment, the practice and research of how organizations cope with the pressures of digital communication of CSR is only just emerging. We argue that organizations should take a step back to apply the ethical premise of CSR communication based on a dialogue and response to stakeholders. Through such an approach of open dialogue, accepting criticism, responding to questioning and action based on the outcome of the discourse, organizations could fundamentally change the self-serving and instrumental public perception of corporations.

Limitations and future research

Our chapter is a conceptual piece, and therefore, we have not sought to explore the ethical premise of CSR through, for example, case studies, which is a limitation. Future research could explore the challenges of operationalizing the ethical premise of CSR through case studies and interviews with communication managers. However, we have provided a critical perspective grounded in the ethical premise of responsibility for future researchers to use as a basis for an empirical study. This would help further our understanding of the nuances and challenges of implementing the ethical premise of CSR and dialogical mindset through digital platforms within organizations. A further limitation of the chapter is that we have explored the ethical premise of CSR in large organizations and hence do not claim to generalize our findings to other contexts, such as SMEs. Hence, future research could explore the ethical premise of CSR, dialogue and digital platforms in the context of SMEs.

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