

# Heading for new shores

## Impact orientation of CSR communication and the need for communicative responsibility

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This editorial is an introduction to the special issue on CSR communication related to the 4th CSR Communication Conference, held in Vienna (Austria) in September 2017. The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the state-of-the-art in academic research on CSR communication concepts, strategies and future scenarios.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The editorial critically evaluates existing academic research dealing with CSR communication in the digital age. More precisely, it analyses established theories and concepts of CSR communication in terms of their fit to meet future challenges.

**Findings** – It can be noted that CSR communication practice is heading for new shores. Economic pressure, legal and political requirements, reputation risks in a digital media ecology and a new civic-minded and well-being-oriented generation of employees require a reorientation of CSR communication from information to impact orientation. Thus, the authors complement the approach of communication about CSR with the concept of communicative responsibility as a normative framework for corporate communication in the future.

**Originality/value** – The analyzed literature as well as the papers of the CSR Communication Conference indicate that the authors are heading toward a future of impact- instead of information-oriented communication. Here, communicative responsibility comes in as a fourth dimension of corporate responsibility, offering a normative framework for strategic, impact-oriented sustainability communication, integrated reporting and internal CSR.

**Keywords** CSR communication, Reporting, Impact, Communicative responsibility, Internal CSR

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Today, we know a lot about CSR concepts, strategies and performance of corporations, institutions and increasingly also of NGOs and other kinds of not-for-profit organizations (Rasche *et al.*, 2017; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). The debate about the relevance of voluntary engagement in social and environmental issues has evolved into recognizing and demanding organizations' responsibility toward their stakeholders (European Commission, 2011), and CSR has become an undisputed – yet contested – concept of corporate conduct in a globalized business world (Rasche *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the European Commission does not see CSR as a voluntary engagement anymore but as “corporate behavior which integrates social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations” (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).



Over the past years we have witnessed a tightening of obligations and legal requirements to report and inform about activities with which an organization contributes to sustainable development (e.g. European Council, 2014; Gulenko, 2018; KPMG *et al.*, 2016). In 2017, 93 percent of the world's largest 250 firms worldwide communicated about their CSR activities and impacts in sustainability/CSR reports (KPMG, 2017). However, the unprecedented CSR endeavors are often to a lesser extent driven by intrinsic ethical motives, but rather by the expectation of possible business returns that companies may reap from CSR initiatives, like building trust and reputation, customer loyalty, brand equity as well as generating positive effects on employee recruitment (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Kim and Park, 2011; UN Global Compact and Accenture, 2016). Organizations expect that "doing good" will also lead to "doing better" through positive reactions of key stakeholder groups like consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004), who show increasing environmental concerns (Weng *et al.*, 2019).

Over the past decade, the debate in academia (first and foremost in business administration) and practice (particularly in consulting) was guided by the belief that communicating about CSR has a generally positive effect on corporate performance (Du *et al.*, 2010; Porter and Kramer, 2002). In this regard, media and communication studies offer a complementary perspective on corporate responsibility in today's media and network society. CSR is not just seen as a "servant" of business interests, but as having an impact on public issue life cycles and on the establishment of normative frameworks like sustainability. This goes hand in hand with an increased intensity of communication about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), influencing the relevance for organizations to communicate about CSR activities and to make sense of sustainability (Moloney and Strengers, 2014).

We note that after an era of institutionalization of mainly external CSR communication we have reached a tipping point where current forms of CSR communication practices are increasingly challenged. After years of mostly voluntary CSR engagement and communication, regulators are tightening their grip by introducing more legal and political requirements. At the same time, reputation risks are intensifying in a digital media environment where consumers and other stakeholders can freely level their criticism against organizations that do not live up to their standards of responsible behavior. Inside the organization, a civic-minded and well-being-oriented generation of employees calls for a new consciousness regarding corporate responsibility also internally. Altogether, these challenges call for a reorientation of CSR communication from information to impact orientation and from communication about CSR (informational approach) to communicative responsibility (impact-oriented approach) as a new normative framework for corporate communication.

### **CSR communication under pressure**

A recent survey by the UN Global Compact and Accenture (2016) of more than 1,000 CEOs of companies that participate in the UN Global Compact shows growing recognition of the interdependencies between business and societal goals and increasing confidence that awareness and commitment are translating into action. About two-thirds of the surveyed CEOs are of the opinion that business is making sufficient efforts to address global challenges, up from just one-third in 2013. Along with the increasing relevance of CSR, communication practitioners and consultants have been discussing the challenges of CSR communication (Zerfass *et al.*, 2018). It has also evolved into an established field of research in business administration and management and, with a slight delay, in media and communication studies at the intersection to public relations and organizational communication (Jarolimek and Weder, 2017). There is a broad range of research showing that communication about CSR makes sense with respect to stakeholder expectations (Freeman *et al.*, 2017) and stakeholder engagement (Lim and Greenwood, 2017). However, as noted above, three developments challenge organizations in their CSR communication and put pressure on them.

From an external perspective, we observe tightened legal frameworks for CSR activities and related information strategies as well as calls for integrated reporting. Furthermore, a constantly changing media environment entails new forms of stakeholder criticism and control through user-generated content in social media with imminent accusations of greenwashing and related reputation risks. Finally, from an internal perspective, employees' demand for corporate responsibility and a good life at work is increasingly influencing internally oriented CSR and internal communication.

*Challenge No. 1: surge in reporting regulations*

Over the past years, there has been a surge in CSR reporting regulations around the world as an increasing number of regulatory bodies attempt to enhance corporate accountability, transparency and responsible business practice. While in some countries like South Africa, Denmark, China and Malaysia CSR reporting became mandatory even before 2011, the global trend picked up during the second decade of the new millennium. In a joint 2016 report called "Carrots and Sticks," KPMG, the Global Reporting Initiative, the United Nations Environment Program and the Centre for Corporate Governance in Africa considered some 400 policies in 64 countries and regions. They report that by 2016 a total of 248 policies were mandatory, as compared with 130 in 2013 (KPMG *et al.*, 2016). In this timeframe, the European Union also introduced Directive 2014/95/EU (CSR Reporting Directive) requiring large European companies to report on their CSR activities and impacts (European Council, 2014). The directive had to be implemented by the Member States by December 6, 2016 (Spiesshofer, 2014), and "requires companies concerned to disclose in their management report information on policies, risks, and outcomes as regards environmental matters, social and employee aspects, respect for human rights, anticorruption and bribery issues, and diversity in their board of directors" (Eccles and Spiesshofer, 2015, p. 15).

Based on a comprehensive literature analysis, Gulenko (2018) suggested several consequences of mandatory CSR reporting: unsurprisingly, it leads to an increase in the number of companies reporting on CSR issues. Regarding report quality, previous research shows that mandatory CSR reporting also leads to an increase in reporting length and number of items disclosed in the report. However, there is no clear evidence that it also leads to an increase in report quality with regard to reporting relevance and credibility. These consequences can partly be explained with the practice by first-time issuers to mimic the experienced reporters (mimetic isomorphism) or to report very similar information by strictly following the regulation (coercive isomorphism; Pedersen *et al.*, 2013). Thus, despite more regulation and consequently more CSR reporting overall, it will be a challenge to enhance the credibility of CSR reporting. Stakeholders will ask themselves whether organizations' reporting is conceptualized to meet the demand for accountable forms of social responsible business or whether it is "just compliance" to regulations without full disclosure.

More reporting may also aggravate the paradox of CSR communication that the more an organization communicates the more it will be under observation and the easier it will be criticized. This paradox is related to general organizational paradoxes (Putnam *et al.*, 2016; Schad *et al.*, 2016). In a dynamic environment of globally networked societies (Castells, 2015), the plurality of stakeholders with competing demands and only limited knowledge about activities and CSR efforts intensifies the emergence of this paradox (Schad *et al.*, 2016) and related communicative challenges.

The increased relevance of CSR has fostered integrated CSR communication, which can be conceptualized as harmonization of all CSR-related communication activities and strategies behind (Diehl *et al.*, 2017). This is accompanied by calls for integrated reporting. According to the International Integrated Reporting Council's (IIRC, 2013) Framework, "[t]he primary purpose of an integrated report is to explain to providers of financial capital how an organization creates value over time. An integrated report benefits all stakeholders

interested in an organization's ability to create value over time, including employees, customers, suppliers, business partners, local communities, legislators, regulators and policy-makers" (IIRC, 2013, p. 4). So far, integrated reporting is voluntary, except for companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock exchange on an "apply and explain" basis. The IIRC demands that "an integrated report should show a holistic picture of the combination, interrelatedness and dependencies between the factors that affect the organization's ability to create value over time" (IIRC, 2013, p. 5).

It is argued that integrated reporting thereby fosters "integrated thinking" so that an organization operates holistically, taking account of all material issues that affect financial performance (i.e. financial, manufactured, natural, intellectual, human and social and relationship) (Eccles and Spiesshofer, 2015). Eccles and Spiesshofer argue that integrated reporting can play a pivotal role in bringing about a re-imagined capitalism, where resource allocation decisions go beyond short-term financial performance, which requires that investors take a longer-term view and use a broader range of performance metrics. Yet, the authors are skeptical that integrated reporting will be universally adopted voluntarily. If regulatory solutions were introduced, they fear that this would result in a mere compliance exercise "achieving in only a minimalist way the information function of reporting and losing the transformation function so vital to achieving a re-imagined capitalism" (Eccles and Spiesshofer, 2015, p. 20).

#### *Challenge No. 2: online CSR communication and the outraged online public*

Research increasingly asks for the sense-making processes in CSR communication in the context of new media and communication technologies, where organizations not only face a changing media ecology, but also a plurality of corporate-stakeholder interactions (Scherer and Palazzo, 2008; Ziek, 2009). Organizations take advantage of the opportunity to engage with publics by actively utilizing various types of social media like Facebook or Twitter. Integrating social media into internal and external corporate communication is the new normal, aiming at generating a discussion among viewers and readers to provide a community for those who want to get involved (Jacques, 2010). However, research shows that organizations use social media inappropriately, namely not to deliberate but to inform (e.g. Etter, 2013; Etter *et al.*, 2011; Fieseler and Fleck, 2013), thereby missing a valuable opportunity to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders and civil society. As a result, stakeholders often view organizations' CSR initiatives skeptically (Illia *et al.*, 2013; Johansen and Ellerup Nielsen, 2011). In a more recent study, Illia *et al.* (2017) discovered that organizations with reputations for CSR have indeed built virtual spaces for dialogue about CSR. Yet, they also find that these spaces remain empty of dialogue, because companies typically facilitate dialogue processes that have a low degree of openness.

While it is challenging for organizations to initiate and manage online dialogue on CSR (e.g. Illia *et al.*, 2017), there is an abundance of online dialogue among users which is uncontrollable by organizations. The enormous growth of social media and mobile devices has provided ever more people with the opportunity to create and share their opinions about organizations, positive and negative, on a scale that was hardly imaginable a few years ago. At the same time, too much and ill-managed CSR communication enhances skepticism about organizations' CSR activities and their motives behind them, leading to discussions about green-, white-, blue- or even pinkwashing (Elving and van Vuuren, 2011). If people are skeptical about CSR, perceive it as greenwashing or certain actions of the organization as irresponsible they can easily spread their criticism online (Einwiller and Steilen, 2015).

Classical forms of offline protest, such as demonstrations or petitions, are nowadays often executed in the digital world in the form of online petitions or boycott calls (März, 2010). Consequently, organizations can quickly get caught up in an online firestorm

(Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014) and online boycott calls. In February 2014, for example, the Copenhagen zoo put down a healthy giraffe and dismembered it in public to feed it to lions at the zoo. The zoo's decision to put down the giraffe and to butcher the corpse in public sparked online outrage in various social media and also prompted online petitions. Such online firestorms and boycott calls can severely damage an organization's reputation, and even more so when the mainstream media picks up the story and thereby multiplies its scope. Research shows that the majority of online firestorms that are picked up by the mainstream media address CSR-related misbehaviors such as perceived discrimination and moral misconduct (Einwiller *et al.*, 2017).

### *Challenge No. 3: internal CSR and the quality of work life*

Referring to the stakeholder definition by Freeman (2010), employees are the stakeholder group that is most directly affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives, and the group that can also greatly influence whether the organization achieves its objectives. Employees have the power and the legitimacy which makes them dominant stakeholders (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Yet, CSR has historically been predominantly externally oriented (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017); research focuses mainly on external CSR communication and often leaves out an internal perspective (see also Golob *et al.*, 2013). This is unfortunate as the rising complexity of the business world and the arduous process of implementing effective social laws make ethics and internally oriented CSR important strategic factors related to the function and sustainability of business organizations (Koonmee *et al.*, 2010). Critical research pleas for a stronger focus on this perspective because it allows profitable insights for CSR communication research (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2011; Chen, 2009; Schultz *et al.*, 2013).

Internal CSR includes aspects like providing a good work environment and conditions, fair remuneration, non-discrimination, diversity and supporting families (Öberseder *et al.*, 2013). It influences the quality of work life (QWL), which is the perception to which the organizational environment meets the full range of employees' needs for their well-being at work (Cascio, 1998). Research shows that QWL has positive effects on job-related outcomes, namely, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and team spirit (Koonmee *et al.*, 2010), that are crucial for the function and sustainability of business organizations. *Fortune Magazine's* survey "Best Companies to Work for" (*Fortune*, 2018) shows that employees are paying attention to QWL, and especially to the factors that go beyond money. Many of the high-ranked companies provide a variety of CSR-related perks such as on-site health care or low-cost child care. Thereby, they are particularly addressing the needs of millennials, who value nonfinancial work aspects like flexibility, personal development and work-life balance even more than older generations and who will soon represent about half of the global workforce (PwC, 2013).

Aside from internal CSR for employees, the internal perspective also includes CSR by employees. More and more organizations are providing their employees the opportunity to engage in CSR activities as part of their job. This can be either inter-organizational volunteering, where employees are released from their work for a certain amount of time to work, for example, in a charity, or intra-organizational volunteering where employees participate in a CSR program by their employer (Peloza and Hassay, 2006). Such corporate volunteering programs are particularly attractive for employees who are socially responsible themselves and who value the opportunity to engage in responsible behavior also in their work life. Thus, a socially responsible organization can provide likeminded employees with extra benefits of having more opportunities to be socially responsible (Singhapakdi *et al.*, 2015). The study by Singhapakdi *et al.* furthermore shows that incongruity between employees' CSR beliefs and their employer's CSR beliefs has a negative effect on an employee's QWL. Yet, if congruity exists, CSR programs can foster the construction of an ecologically, ethically and environmentally responsible corporate self,

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which engenders an aspirational and ideational image (Costas and Kärreman, 2013). Costas and Kärreman see CSR programs as part of organizations' wider aspirational control regimes. The "ideal of CSR of being a socially responsible persona speaks to employees' aspirations and provides a basis for identification with the organization" (p. 407).

Altogether, these three challenges suggest a new understanding of CSR communication. It underscores the understanding of sustainability as a normative framework and requires a reorientation from communication about CSR (informational approach) to communicative responsibility (impact-oriented approach).

### **Sustainability as a normative framework for future CSR communication**

More and more critical approaches on CSR communication complement the information-focused research in this field. Constitutive approaches to understand paradoxes open up new perspectives on CSR communication in today's media society (Putnam *et al.*, 2016; Schultz *et al.*, 2013; Osburg and Lohrmann, 2017). This goes hand in hand with a conceptualization of CSR communication as sense-making and sense-giving in iterative progressive processes (Morsing *et al.*, 2008; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010), and less as a means to maximize business returns (Du *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, organizations are challenged to engage in dialogues with stakeholders on various issue arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010) or rhetoric arenas (Combs and Holladay, 2012). Not only this constitutive perspective, but also the progressively visible, explicit communication practices put the character of CSR communication and related standards and normative frameworks up for discussion.

This is where sustainability as a normative framework for negotiation processes about the dimensions of the allocation and taking of corporate responsibility comes in. Companies can create their own interpretation of sustainable development by discussing it and reporting about it. Then, communication about sustainability results in communication for sustainability, because talking about it creates awareness and can be an engine for change (Weder, 2017). It also means moving beyond the relationship between CSR and financial performance (Margolis and Walsh, 2003; Orlitzky *et al.*, 2003) or CSR from a marketing perspective (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Instead, sustainability as a normative framework for CSR communication offers a broader perspective on environmental and social issues like resources, diversity, workplace security and communicative behavior itself. It leads to a stronger integrated perspective on communication processes and structures.

With regard to Challenge No. 1, this raises the questions whether mandatory CSR reporting leads to enhanced report quality as to credibility, relevance and transparency, or whether it leads to mere compliance and aggravates the CSR communication paradox? And it remains to be seen whether integrated reporting will help bring about a re-imagined capitalism (Eccles and Spiesshofer, 2015), where investors take a longer-term view and use a broader range of performance metrics to make their "sustainable" decisions.

Beyond the challenge of communicating explicitly about CSR strategy and activities, CSR is an inherently paradoxical concept in seeking to balance between contradictory dimensions of economic, environmental and social values (Van der Byl and Slawinski, 2015). The variety of stakeholders with partly competing demands aggravates these contradictions (Schad *et al.*, 2016). Not only business dictates the game, and it is not only its discourses on CSR that prevail in society (Elving *et al.*, 2015; Brammer *et al.*, 2012). Stakeholders are not only becoming increasingly concerned with the role of business in our society – much more, there are emerging stakeholders, discourses and related communicators that have to play a role in the business world. Referring to Elving *et al.* (2015, p. 124), we note that a broader discourse on dimensions of corporate responsibilities has originated and communication is oriented toward shared understanding and balanced interests in terms of a reproduction of lifeworlds (see also Jonker and Nijhof, 2006; Habermas, 1987).

This takes us back to Challenge No. 2, regarding CSR communication in a digital changing media ecology where a plurality of often contradictory opinions collides. In this context, more research is needed on whether and how organizations are using social media for dialogue about CSR with their varied stakeholders, and on how an open and constructive dialogue about CSR can be created online, also with skeptical and critical publics.

From an internal perspective, organizational duties evolve around ensuring a good QWL for the workforce. However, recognizing the existence of something called a “corporate responsibility,” organizations are confronted with the question of what is considered “good” and how far the good life is created as well as reproduced by and within the organization. The question also arises who (agent) is responsible to realize, secure and manage the process of value creation and reproduction (moral agency)? Thus, from an organizational communication point of view, the “internal responsibility” is linked to concepts like power, authority, leadership, accountability as well as moral agency.

With regard to Challenge No. 3, future research can address questions regarding the organizational dynamics of how CSR is developed, practiced and communicated internally. Research on the internal role of CSR for the construction of meaning and identity regulation and how it is received, practiced and resisted by employees will furthermore help to shed light on the internal processes and effects of CSR and CSR communication.

### **Heading for new shores: communicative responsibility**

In order for CSR communication to make a difference, it has to be impactful in quantity and quality, and be more than “just” information (Chen, 2009). To meet the abovementioned challenges, we need a concept for understanding public discourses and their role in co-constructing the allocation and taking of responsibility in an era of digitalization, which is handled under the umbrella of “stakeholder responsiveness” (Lim and Greenwood, 2017), “interactive CSR communication” (Eberle *et al.*, 2013; Saxton and Waters, 2014; Cho *et al.*, 2017) or “virtual corporate social responsibility” (Korschun and Du, 2013). Here, issues like accountability and disclosure, consequences and normative frameworks like sustainability (Golob *et al.*, 2013) as well as the integrated concepts of CSR communication as interaction, co-creation and the significance of connectedness become significant (Golob *et al.*, 2017; Diehl *et al.*, 2017; Crane and Glozer, 2016; Schultz *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, we would like to shift the focus of CSR communication from an informational orientation to an impact orientation. With a critical approach to CSR communication understood as co-creation and sense-making, as negotiation processes related to a normative framework, CSR communication should no longer be seen as the communication about social, economic and environmental responsibility. Instead, it is about how the prevalent issues in these dimensions are communicated. Thus, we introduce the concept of communicative responsibility not (only) as a fourth pillar of CSR (Weder and Karmasin, 2017) in the sense of an obligation or responsibility to communicate, but rather as a normative framework for CSR communication in the future. In other words: only if CSR communication is “responsible” in terms of being sustainable, transparent, objective, authentic and trustworthy, it can have an impact. Thereby, the information-oriented conceptualization of communication as “reporting only” can be advanced with the concept of communicative responsibility, which encompasses integrated practices to communicate about CSR activities, communicative practices to identify responsibilities (evaluation, stakeholder involvement, responsibility communication), as well as values and normative frameworks to communicate responsibly (safeguard, beware of “greenwashing,” communicative responsibility).

The framework itself, meaning its core values and ethical principles, can only be developed from within an organization. Communicative responsibility is conceived as the process of reflections on responsible communication and reflections on socio-political concepts like sustainability as constituent of organizational communication (Weder *et al.*, 2018).

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While corporate morality is hard to standardize, let alone the communication of normative frameworks, Morsing (2017) discussed that CSR communication defines an organization's morality (SOURCE). Organizations are expected to be socially oriented, sincere about this commitment and transparent about their social responsibilities (Morsing, 2017). Discussing a concept of communicative responsibility implies an understanding of CSR communication as communicative action that mobilizes new communicative actions (Morsing, 2017). In this sense, we perceive communicative responsibility as the core principle of impact-oriented CSR communication.

Overall, we can state that the significance of corporate (social) responsibility communication in the digital age is undisputed – but, at the same time, communicative responsibility is the new “norm,” influencing CSR communication to be rather impact- than information-oriented. CSR communication has an increasing impact on issue life cycles and on the establishment of normative frameworks like sustainability, morality in consumer behavior and decision-making processes as well as internal organizational processes and perceptions. This has to be recognized and taken into account in future CSR communication research, practice and education.

### Overview of the papers in this special issue

This special issue of *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* features the latest knowledge, research and insights on CSR communication as presented at the 4th CSR Communication Conference held in Vienna September 21–23, 2017. The conference included more than 70 presentations altogether and was conceptualized as building a bridge between academic research and experiences from CSR communication practice. The ten most inspiring papers were selected for this special issue following a rigorous peer-review process. Nine were presented at the conference, and one paper was added because of its good fit with the focus of this special issue.

The first paper by Tuan *et al.* presents a critical reflection on theories and methods used to conceptualize and explain CSR communication. The authors systematically reviewed 534 papers on CSR communication updating the current debate about the ontological and epistemological paradigms that characterize the field. One of their implications is that the instrumental paradigm, implying an information focus in most of CSR communication studies, is linked to the dominance of quantitative methods used in CSR communication research. The authors propagate a stronger interaction between this perspective and a stronger normative and constitutive paradigm to compensate the “corporate drive” and focus on sense-making processes and normative frameworks like sustainability.

The next two papers show the limitations of an information-centered approach to CSR communication more precisely. First, linked to Challenge No. 1, Heath and Waymer investigate elite organizations and discuss how much they serve as aspirational CSR role models for other organizations to raise their standards. This paper shows that external CSR communication and reporting in particular have an impact on the competitors as well as other “in-network actors.” Thus, as has been discussed above, it is important to consider “how” CSR is communicated because especially those organizations new to CSR communication and reporting tend to mimic the more experienced ones. Only if the quality is considered, CSR communication becomes more “holistic” in the sense of demonstrating how standards can accrue resources that benefit the organization and society.

Just like Heath and Waymer, Hetze *et al.* stimulate to critically reflect already established concepts in CSR communication, here the notoriously proclaimed concept of “stakeholder dialogue.” Supported by empirical data from the German-speaking countries, the authors state that even in an online environment, where dialogue is possible in principle, organizations provide primarily information; they detect a lack of stakeholder involvement and discursive practices. The authors conclude that the potential of online

CSR communication is not yet tapped and that it has its own rules. Thus, the digital public sphere challenges organizations of all kind (Challenge No. 2).

Another set of limitations of online CSR communication is demonstrated in the paper by Maier on diversity management and CSR. She focuses on multimodal discursive strategies to show the efforts made by organizations to strategically integrate diversity management and CSR communication into one single framework. This qualitative analysis is complemented by the paper of Kim *et al.*, who explore the effects of social media features and the way the message source and presence of positive social cues influence the evaluations of CSR messages on Facebook. Both papers show that CSR communication is multi-faceted and, again, not only about information. CSR communication has an impact on the perception of issues and organizations in general – internally and externally – and especially online communication has a social constitutive facet.

This leads to the third challenge (No. 3) of ethical considerations and related dynamics coming from inside the organization. Koch *et al.* look at employees and their (potentially) perceived benefits from participating in CSR activities and discuss the implications for a stronger focus on employees' engagement in CSR. The elaborated empirical analysis shows that the benefit is not always a behavioral form of participation but often something like the improved team spirit. The paper by Einwiller *et al.* analyzes the effects of the Austrian Federal Railways' CSR activities for refugees on stakeholder perceptions and behavior. The survey results show that CSR communication had a positive impact on the company's CSR image. They also demonstrate the need for more orientation on the quality of CSR communication and communicative responsibility as point of orientation for an impact-orientated CSR communication. There are three more papers leading in this direction: Perez *et al.* present a theoretical framework of message authenticity in CSR communication and its impact on the persuasiveness of CSR communication based on theoretical and empirical literature on authenticity. A stronger focus on the messages is taken by Coombs in his exploration of transmedia storytelling. With his case study, the author stimulates further theory development for CSR communication, promoting a stronger focus on narratives. He furthermore supports the assumption that CSR communication is multi-dimensional and should not only be discussed from an instrumental perspective. Much more, CSR messages can become independent and prevent the backlash created by some – more pragmatic – CSR messages. Finally, Weder *et al.* introduce framing as another fruitful theoretical concept that is rather sparsely used in CSR communication. With their paper on antagonistic framing of sustainability, the authors not only introduce sustainability as a normative framework for CSR communication. They furthermore analyze CSR messages and narratives and identify most commonly used CSR frames – showing that the status quo of CSR communication is rather limited.

Overall, all papers contribute to the further development of CSR communication as a demarcated research area. Moreover, they highlight the inter- and transdisciplinary character of the field, coming from various theoretical and methodological backgrounds. In particular, all papers put the dichotomy of communication about CSR and communicative responsibility up for discussion, which has been identified as one of the core areas for future research on CSR, sustainability, media, the public sphere and communication.

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#### **Further reading**

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