

Sustainable Communication? Media and Communication Responsibility in Global Transformation Processes



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1 Sustainability as Guiding Principle for CSR?

Sustainability is currently one of the most challenging terms and labels, used and abused in various public communication efforts. Over the past few years, mainly corporate communication transformed the simple meaning of the ability of a system or structure to be maintained at a certain rate or level into a “label” or “buzz word,” now associated with “green” or “future oriented,” adding a certain degree of morality and the feeling of “you’ve done well.”

The concept of sustainability is originally focused on how we treat our resources (WCED, 1987), it is still communicated as alternative within our market-driven economy and very rarely as alternative *to* the existing capitalistic system.

However, even within the existing economic system, not only corporates, but also organizations of all kinds and sizes are responsible toward the society, which is part of the definition of the so-called Corporate Social Responsibility (European Greenbook, 2001). Furthermore, they play a major role in socio-environmental transformation processes, as soon as they start to think and communicate about possible alternative futures. To conceptualize and frame a more sustainable future, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, UN, 2022) offer a framework or

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“blueprint” to achieve a better future for all. Thus, to define the future, sustainability works as normative and guiding principle (Weder, 2021a; Grunwald, 2012).

Sustainability as guiding principle is part of political debates, but much more it is taken up by corporates and industry as part of the responsibility they want to take toward the society—again, in an economic, but also social, environmental, and cultural dimension (Rasche et al., 2017; Diehl et al., 2017; Weder et al., 2019). Corporate Social Responsibility is predominantly directed toward specific stakeholders but includes negotiations and conversations within organizational settings about how to take the allocated responsibility and the fit of the activities related to the core business. Here communication comes into play.

2 CSR and Communication

CSR Communication includes all communication within the organizational context, where responsibilities in an economic, social, and environmental dimension are discussed. Thus, it is a way of thinking, related to the responsibility toward the society that an organization is willing to take. However, CSR communication puts the interests and requirements of (specific) stakeholders at the center of the organizations’ attention (Freeman & Moutchnik, 2013) and focuses on communication as dialogue, on participatory approaches and engagement (Golob & Podnar, 2011). So, CSR communication has advanced from communication about certain CSR activities to a holistic, inclusive understanding of conversations about the relationship between economic and ethical values (Christensen et al., 2017).

Over the years, CSR and related communication efforts have been operationalized from a pragmatic perspective, because stakeholders request companies to not only be engaged, but also to engage the stakeholders themselves and to keep them informed and involved in related organizational matters through communication. Driven by this demand, CSR communication is first and foremost a straightforward task, focused predominantly on keeping the stakeholders informed about corporate CSR activities, with some downsides from aspirational CSR communication (Winkler et al., 2020) to greenwashing (Elving et al., 2015). However, CSR related communication is happening on various levels and includes, for example, leadership communication, community engagement, and issue and crisis management, to name a few. Communicating about and for an organization and their responsibilities toward the society in multiple dimensions implies more than only better information; it implies a deep understanding of the central role of communication, the media and strategic communication and Public Relations for social impact, stakeholder engagement and getting the social license to operate (Hurst & Johnston, 2021; Johnston & Lane, 2021). It includes increased awareness of relevant issues, the willingness to leave the own comfort zone, the willingness to change and to negotiate the meaning of core values that drive CSR activities within the organization (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013; Trittin & Schoeneborn, 2017), from the leadership to the individual employee.

Today, after decades of practical work in this area and an increasing amount of academic work in the area of CSR, Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Governance and related communication activities, there are three developments that we want to highlight as future directions—specifically from a media and communication perspective and considering organizational activities that are linked to global transformation processes and the principle of sustainability: (1) the necessity to re-define and reframe sustainability as normative principle and *guardrails* for corporate responsibility; (2) the necessity to conceptualize *communicative sustainability* and sustainable communication and, related to that, to (3) discuss the role of *media organizations* and their responsibility for sustainable communication. This is related to their function to produce a “public good” with a certain *value*, which needs to meet the criteria of being “sustainable” and a contribution to social transformation processes as well.

3 Media, CSR, and Sustainability

The three dimensions will be briefly outlined and discussed in the following, followed by an overview of the contributions, collected in the volume at hand.

3.1 *Sustainability as Guardrail for CSR (Media and Communicative Responsibility)*

As mentioned above, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) describes an established management focus of today’s corporates and organizations of various kind, scope, and size. The social impact (SI) on the society and the key publics for which they function is lately debated in various fields of (mostly strategic) communication research (Rasche et al., 2017; Diehl et al., 2017; Allen, 2016; Heath, 2018; Hurst et al., 2020; Saffer, 2019). Alongside, the idea that organizations need the permission, the license to operate (SLO) (Hurst et al., 2020), challenges all kind of business, but media corporations in particular. Unlike CSR initiatives in other industry sectors, CSR and sustainability communication practices and related research in the media industry are still underdeveloped (Hou & Reber, 2011; Zhang & Swanson, 2006; Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017). Additionally, while even media corporations have started to think about their responsibility and begun to report on single activities, there seems to be a gap of criteria and guidelines for the “how” to do that. What is the normative framework for activities? Media freedom? Journalism ethics? Or sustainability as moral guidepost or compass or even the Sustainable Development Goals?

The challenges are that until recently the media industry has not been challenged to introduce sustainable and responsible business models anyway; furthermore, the

watchdog-role that media play in observing traditional businesses and politics has provided a sufficient legitimacy for a long time—why to do more? Why to go beyond the role as the fourth estate? Lastly, the debate about the media’s public value has covered questions about responsibilities toward the society and related impact so far.

In an era where fake news is constantly spread and algorithms co-decide the media agenda, the question about the impact on the public sphere, the public value of media products, and the license to operate are becoming prevalent with a new normative framework of sustainability. In this book we will bridge the “former” debate on *public value* with the current debate on *social impact* and the *social license to operate in the media industry*. In the focus is the double nature of producing economic and cultural goods at the same time (Bracker et al., 2017; Karmasin & Bichler, 2017) which leads to the assumption that media companies have a double responsibility for the way they present reality (in their products) and with this controlling and criticizing economic and political developments and raising ethical concerns in the public debate on the one hand (*social impact*), and for their own activities as a corporation on the other hand (*license to operate*).

Therefore, sustainability is not an object or key event that media can “report on.” Instead, sustainability is a normative idea and stipulation to consider and anticipate the consequences of individual and organizational action. Sustainability is the guiding principle for individual and organizational action. Then, sustainability communication is all communication about specific issues (social, environmental, cultural, and economic issues), which thematizes, problematizes, discusses, and negotiates the principle of sustainability (Weder, 2021b).

Accordingly, media organizations are responsible to facilitate these negotiation processes, to enable sense- and meaning-making (Berger, 2009); they can create a culture of sustainability (Weder, 2022) by bringing together all aspects of sustainable action (Weder, 2022; Soini & Dessein, 2016). This process includes all facets of media actions and interventions that either promote communication for social change or media and product development and further institutionalization, including a formal policy on media sustainability.

3.2 Sustainability Communication as Part of Media CSR Concepts (Global Perspectives)

There are a few examples to look at where media corporations deal with their *twin responsibility* of holding society responsible and being responsible themselves, what media outlets perceive as their responsibilities and where they already action this with what kind of resources—and related to which normative principles. The Austrian Public Broadcaster ORF is one of the media organizations, like the BBC, where the Public Value debate is leading to a wider normative framework of a sustainable future, and related activities are sought to make the organizations

accountable for their behavior—as a business, as a corporate citizen and as the producer of a critical public and “culture” (Weder, 2022).

As mentioned above, CSR & the media is a relationship where more research—and voices from the practice—is still needed. However, sustainability always adds another tier of complexity to any assessment—because it is not only “blurry” if used as master-frame (Weder, 2021a), but furthermore, it cannot be observed directly and must be estimated based on things that can be observed—but only retroactively. Additionally, sustainability relies on very individual perceptions and conceptions of what the future is and how it should look like—which makes it strongly related to the cultural context (O’Riordan & Voisey, 1997).

As a consequence, it is important to differentiate between disciplinary lenses, i.e., if media organizations and their responsibility are analyzed from an economic perspective or if we’re looking at the sense- and meaning-making processes and the “value” in terms of the public and public interest from a media and communication studies perspective. Also, the cultural context is important, as is the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2011; etc.; Möller et al., 2019). Cultural differences do not only exist in terms of media systems and societal value frameworks, but also in the way CSR is established, institutionalized, and/or even operationalized as a concept and sustainability and sustainable development are known and/or applied and referred to in the CSR activities.

3.3 Media Organizations, Public Value, and Sustainable Communication (Practical Insights)

Not only global perspectives are needed, to understand all the dimensions of media corporate responsibility. The dimensions of responsibility have also to be reflected on considering innovative concepts of news production. The media industry needs a stronger focus on sustainability as normative framework and principle of action, as a moral compass for leadership, management, and journalism in media corporations, and needs to discuss how the CSR and sustainability debate is increasingly converging with the former public value debate.

Media corporations are not only measured by their financial value, as described above, they do not (only) get their legitimacy via market acceptance. They create an extra value, which is related to the dimension of the society as such, the so-called public value. This is not only related to what they do themselves and to their product, but media are also increasingly seen as important stakeholder, as an organization with which other organizations, mainly corporates, get engaged with as part of their CSR management—seeking “publicity,” seeking to create awareness for their CSR activities (Tench et al., 2007). Here, public service media play a different role compared to private media corporations, who are much more depended on financial partnerships. Also, the European perspective with a historically strong role of public broadcasting can be contrasted with an Australian or US-perspective, with a much

more concentrated and economically driven media landscape. This accentuates the importance to reframe the concept of public value with sustainability as potentially new “universal value.”

In the following, a brief overview over the contributions to this volume is given, outlining their main topics, perspectives, and key insights related to questions around media CSR, responsible media management, and the role of sustainability as moral compass and universal “public value.”

4 Contributions

The volume starts with three essays, which approach media corporate responsibility and sustainable communication from different perspectives.

Matthias Karmasin develops a framework that helps media outlets to communicate responsibility across cultural differences. He argues that in general a cultural transition calls for adaptation of values and standards. But what impact does that notion have on an entity like CSR that mainly consist of values and standards? Karmasin offers criteria like respect to arguments by others, rational argumentation and—among others—openness and self-reflection as fundamental norms to path the way to communicate with integrity and about integrity.

A deeper understanding of the relationship between culture and sustainability is suggested by Franzisca Weder. Media corporates are discussed as responsible to cultivate sustainability in their organization and products. The idea discussed in the conceptual essay is that media have the responsibility to facilitate public discourses about and around sustainability, they need to create, facilitate, and maintain conversational spaces, where sustainability is negotiated as potential “universal value,” and where examples are given for behavior and activities that are guided by sustainability as moral compass.

Rademacher concludes with linking these thoughts to theories of transformation and change. He proposes a “new deal” for news media that not only integrates classic elements like sensemaking and aspirational talk from organizational communication and phenomena like solution journalism but proposes a general ethos of sustainability across their media business models.

In the second part of the volume we take up a management perspective that asks how sustainability can work as a moral compass, and more specific as guardrail and framework for CSR and how the claim to act responsibly can be maintained even under critical conditions and in crisis situations.

In their chapter, Paul Clemens Murschetz, Eduard Frantz, and Niko Alm critically discuss the validity and performance measurement of public value theory. By looking at how Austria’s main media player ORF is currently transforming its public service broadcasting, they present real-life insights to refine and reframe the concept of public value. After introducing the original public value concept and comparing it to the latest developments in the academic and public discussions, they argue that we need alternative quality-based indicators in order to measure Public Service Media

(PSM) and their activities effectively, e.g., through audience satisfaction and approval ratings or “value for money” measures. Finally, they discuss the general concept of finance models for public service media. They argue that even if the established model of license fees still dominates academic discourses, it needs to be fundamentally reviewed since the deficits of the model seem to outweigh its benefits. Besides new financing models, public value for PSM is a clear definition of its mission and vision; however, the impact for society needs to be defined and measurable.

The case study on the “Relotius scandal” involves Germany’s most prominent news magazine DER SPIEGEL. Christian Pieter Hofmann and Stephan Russ-Mohl focus on communication efforts of this specific media company in a crisis situation, where—to their observation—the lines between journalism and corporate communications start to vanish. The authors describe CSR as a possible distinction when it comes to media coverage in a crisis narrative. Likewise, journalistic quality is perceived as an element of media companies’ corporate responsibility. With this conceptual background they unfold the Relotius scandal where a highly respected journalist created media products almost too good to be true and managed to pass all editorial quality checks. The following internal investigation was perceived mostly as transparent, credible, and comprehensive by the interviewed experts. However, they found that through a joint crisis response team also editorial staff members repeated the corporate position and took the role of spokespersons—which under regular circumstances would be seen as a threat to editorial independence and journalistic quality.

Gerrit Boehnke analyzes the role of CSR in the recruiting communication of German and Austrian media brands. He merges the discussion on the importance of CSR for employee attractiveness with the debate on its value for overall business performance. His empirical analysis of web content of selected media companies highlights that CSR is not only important for B2C, but also important for B2B as well as corporate–employee relationships. However, he finds that CSR is not explicitly addressed within the career websites as a decision criterion or field of communication. This remarkable low-level of integration and relevance of CSR in the analyzed career websites contradict the idea that media companies explicitly aim at junior executives through CSR communication. Further research in this area might bring new insights into this contradiction.

Digital technologies challenge old values of media corporates. Cinzia Dal Zotto, Afshin Omid, and Esmaeil Norouzi focus in their study on an effect that they call “smart exclusion”: on the one hand, digital technologies could be harnessed to extract, produce, analyze, and distribute data in an intelligent way and thus allow news organizations to reach both profit and positive social impact. On the other hand, however, these technologies transform the nature of news work, moving its focus from creating public-informing ideas to distribution and therefore a focus on marketing activities. However, particularly smart technologies create a new, uncontested reality for defining the workplace in news organizations and demand mainly, if not only, the involvement of tech-savvy talents ideally best suited to work within this new context. As a result, “smart exclusion” emerges, which impacts on

news organizations' social license to operate. This chapter conceptualizes the process of smart exclusion in news media, suggesting a symbiotic perspective for dealing with the related challenges and ensuring the respect of the diversity and inclusion dimensions of news organizations' social responsibility as part of their sustainable development.

In the third part of the volume, we take a deeper look into developments from a global perspective. We first examine the German development in recent years. Annkathrin Clemens and Josephine Franz compare CSR strategies on public and private media companies in Germany, interviewing media managers from the most important German outlets. The findings of a series of explorative interviews show that most of the managers identify their societal responsibility through their editorial content, i.e., public value. However, it became clear that overall the awareness for corporate responsibility and the need for generating social impact is growing and many media companies are actually developing specific CSR strategies. From a leadership perspective, media companies are increasingly confronted with growing legitimization pressure and high expectations of their stakeholders. Thus, they intend to increase their credibility with their CSR strategies. A strongly changed competitive environment and changed expectations from the applicant market require media companies to deal with CSR and take action, which has also been debated in Boehnke's contribution.

Moving over to Switzerland, Sarah Marschlich and Daniel Vogler analyze whether and if so, how news coverage about Media Social Responsibility (MSR) has changed over time, how news coverage about MSR contributes to the media reputation of media organizations, and how these aspects differ between public and private media organizations and owned and non-owned media outlets. They conducted a quantitative content analysis of news articles in 10 Swiss media outlets covering the social aspects of Swiss media organizations from 2010 to 2019. Overall, their results show that MSR coverage has increased over the period, primarily driven by coverage of public media organizations' MSR. However, the tone of the articles was mainly negative, implying that MSR may pose a risk to the social reputation of media organizations. By providing comprehensive insights into the role of the media in negotiating MSR, their study significantly contributes to the emerging field of MSR research.

Tevhide Serra Gorpe and Burku Öksüz aim to explore the concept of media responsibility and CSR of media institutions in Turkey from a journalism educators' points of view. Their contribution focuses on gaining a better understanding of journalism educators' perceptions of *responsibility*—with respect to the Turkish media landscape. The research has practical implications on journalism education on a broader level because it investigates how and to what extent issues like CSR, sustainability, or social impact are integrated to curricula, including the challenges in teaching media corporate responsibility to journalism students. The authors show that Turkish educators in particular see the main task of media corporate CSR facilitated through journalism, and thus in writing good and objective news—and not in setting up CSR strategies and projects. However, from an education perspective, the authors critically reflect that media partnering on CSR matters with NGOs

and other entities which is recommended by the interviewed journalism educators might not be enough in a changing news world and for creating social impact.

Bringing in a perspective from South America, in her chapter Elena Block discusses the viability of news media's corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs in Venezuela—and thus, in a different political and media landscape compared to the previously discussed European examples. She describes the politicization of media, their strategies, and this an ongoing “government–media clash” which has also dominated the country's political communication for two decades. By exploring how the deep political polarization, the mediatization of politics, and politicization of the news media effect the CSR programs of media companies she shows that despite the successful media and journalistic education initiatives the most important CSR work is not the corporate “program,” but rather the everyday journalistic work which is still following the idea(l) of providing trustworthy, ethical, community-engaged, public service journalism. The chapter shows, that in a country like Venezuela, the social impact and Corporate Social Responsibility is rather “just” covering the daily news and stories that are of real importance to the people and communities, thus, public media serves the interests of society and makes by doing this a real impact to people's life.

Richard Murry writes about “Post-Murdoch” regional media in Australia where news media are increasingly under pressure. Looking especially at the disrupted media scene in Queensland where the Star Group filled the void that was left by Murdoch's News Corp. pulling out of the regional newspapers they owned after the COVID-19 pandemic, he shows how journalist work beyond their contracted working hours. That leads to a situation where journalism is shallow and predictable that the conclusion is that only “the illusion of journalism exists”: The news media are still present but they are unable or unwilling to take on stories that challenge authorities or support democracy. Murray's gripping chapter reminds us about the fundamental value of free and independent journalistic systems and draws a rather dystopic scenario of what is to come in other western countries.

From this chapter, we transition to a number of practical insights on sustainability related activities in specific media corporations. We start with Peter Greste's rather skeptical vision of what he calls the infodemic. In his essay he proposes the death of objectivity but still leaves us with the optimistic notion that journalism has a chance to save his objectivity. Second contribution is delivered by Wolfgang Reising, who explains that Public Service Media are perceived not only along their mission of securing independent news and information; he defines media companies as foremost economic actor who is confronted with a number of expectations; thus, CSR activities are a matter of compliance with these expectations. This view is also supported by Katja Bäuerlein from UFA, a private TV, and film producer. She explains the system of norms and believes which led to a complex CSR program. However, from her perspective the main impact is less on the society but much more on the employees—which supports some assumptions developed in the previous chapters of this volume. Finally, two interviews lead us into the heart of both Austrian and German Public Service Media, ORF and ZDF. Both public broadcasters started early with CSR reporting and activities, that are indeed directed

toward the own employees, and here specifically the journalists. Anita Malli points to the trainings offered for journalists to be informed around climate change and sustainability related issues to use this lens in all aspects of their reporting. However, she emphasizes that the trainings need to be requested by the leadership, mainly the chief editors, and, beyond that, the general management.

Greste's contribution supports one of the main lines of argumentation of this volume. Looking into different countries, media systems and levels of responsibility, from individual, institutional, to professional and systemic responsibility, sustainability has the potential to be a guiding framework and moral compass for activities under the strategic umbrella of CSR. However, there is still the need to further negotiate the meaning of sustainability from a media and journalism perspective; related values like independence, objectivity need to be discussed in the same way as fairness, diversity or inclusion, and equality, which can be one step toward a new Sustainable Development Goal #18: sustainable communication and media.

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