

CSR as Common Sense Issue? A Theoretical Exploration of Public Discourses, Common Sense and Framing of Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract The article aims to explore and define Corporate Social Responsibility as common sense related discourse in corporations and amongst organizations and their stakeholder and discusses the potential of CSR as “communication content” for media and communication studies. To theoretically capture CSR as “common sense”, issues in general are conceptualized as ‘fields’ in Bourdieu’s sense, complemented by an innovative concept of framing. From a content related perspective, the theoretical reflections enable the definition of CSR as common sense issue by differentiating it from neutral positions and hegemonic frames.

The term ‘common sense’ comprises common beliefs and implicit knowledge used in every action, interaction and therefore in every interpersonal, organizational and mass mediated communication process. Common sense complements the more explicit expert knowledge and common sense related reasoning and can be described as a core tool of intelligent behavior. In one of the basic and most influential pamphlets of the ‘American enlightenment’ and revolution Thomas Paine (2004) promotes, for example, the idea of the ‘necessity for independency’ as such a common belief. Further back in history, there is a long philosophical tradition with Thomas Reid, G.E. Moore or Roderick Chisholm as key figures which consider common sense beliefs and their central role for the individual and the society: “we cannot give up our belief in them” (Lemos, 2004, p. 1; Reid, 1764/1970). Today, *common sense* is broadly discussed in political science in terms of a ‘democracy-oriented’ principle and as such can be traced back to the concepts of Rousseau (Rousseau, 1997) or Locke (Laslett, 1988). As well, common sense is about rationality (Kant, 2008), it’s about logic (‘horse-sense’, nobody would put it into question), it’s about a general opinion (the majority thinks the same) or, paradoxically, it is *not* about opinion because it is the way it goes, it is *uncontroversial* and *not-reactive*. Though, the ‘problem’ of common sense issues

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is that there isn't a problem, that there are no different opinions, that there is no general debate and with that no public discourse. Common sense is a (socially constructed) ideal which functions as constraint for social behavior. So what if the responsibility of organizations as corporate actor towards the society is common sense? And if so, how can CSR communication be postulated and required? How can we describe CSR as content that "has to be communicated"?

The present article focuses on Corporate Social Responsibility from a content related perspective. CSR is mostly described as the allocation and taking of responsibility by an organization towards the stakeholder (European Commission, 2001) based on the principle of social, economic and ecologic sustainability (Weder, 2012). However, most of the literature on CSR and communication focusses on CSR as content, as something that has to be or is communicated by an organization to legitimize corporate activities and take responsibility itself (see Weder, Karmasin in this handbook) (Heinrich, 2013; Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011; Karmasin & Weder, 2008; Matten & Moon, 2008; May, Cheney, & Roper, 2007). The communication about CSR activities happens mostly through CSR reporting (sustainability report, CSR report, environmental report etc.; see Fifka, 2014). In the media, CSR is more or less invisible (see Tengblad & Ohlsson, 2009; Weder, 2012) except a corporation lacks of responsibility which as a scandal dominates media reporting—mostly for a short period of time. Thus, from a content related perspective, the question arises, why despite increasing CSR activities and communication efforts, there is a lack of "publicness" of CSR as an issue itself. Why is the responsibility allocated to organizations not an ongoing issue in the media, why there isn't as public debate on CSR per se? Is it because it's common sense, as proposed at the beginning?

Indeed, one reason could be that CSR is based on a "common sense belief", that organizations are responsible towards the society. Following this argumentation, the basic question of this article is if CSR as common sense issue has the chance to be communicated in the corporation, amongst the corporation and their stakeholder and further to be debated in the public at all? And what is the condition for the "publicness" of CSR related content if taken as "common sense issue"?

So the theoretical challenge of the discussion of CSR as common sense issue in general is that they are *not* debated in the public—either because of their generality, normativity or just because there exists a hegemonic structure of meaning. To meet this challenge of common sense as *invisible* or *hidden moral structure* of public communication processes, this article is based upon a new concept of issue fields (Sect. 1). With this concept CSR is described in the second section of the article (2) as neither a neutral position nor as hegemonic frame but as a meta structure which can work as a reference for the contextualization of other (publicly debated) issues. The potential and limitations of this are discussed in the conclusion (Sect. 3).

1 Public Discourses and Issue Fields

To define CSR as content that is publicly debated or not, it is necessary to theoretically identify CSR as an issue in the public sphere. Today we have to deal with a growing number of public spheres that are related to a specific issue (Benhabib, 1992; Butler Breese, 2011; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002); here, competing interests meet, in addition to society-wide ‘issue-monoliths’ which structure different spheres. New media technologies and with that new social connectivities (Weintraub & Kumar, 1997) lead to new metaphors of spheres, networks, webs, screens or culture (McGuigan, 2005) which “illuminate” public life (Brouwer & Asen, 2010, p. 2f.). This new situation makes it necessary to consider smaller fields of discourse on a structural level. Issue fields as highly particular phenomena (Eder, 2006, p. 608; Weder, 2012) can be described through processes of structuration related to a broader cultural context. To define issue fields on a “level in-between” a synthesis of Bourdieu’s field theory and Giddens concept of structuration is used.

1.1 *Fields and Structuration*

On the basis of the different approaches of the public sphere or their “incarnations” (Butler Breese, 2011, p. 133), here, a public issue field will be defined as a communication sphere marked by a ‘high density of communication flows’ which is more dense on the inside than on the outer limits (Peters, 2007, p. 329). Thus, the public sphere is the totality of all forms of communication and communication structures ‘bunched’ as issues. Furthermore, the public sphere consists of a multitude of publics that are constituted on the basis of shared experiences, shared interests or shared communication intentions (Butler Breese, 2011; Weder, 2012). But how can we grasp the ‘communication structure’ of the public sphere?

The most relevant aspect to theoretically conceptualize issue fields as communication structures clustered as issue seems to be Giddens’ idea of the ‘duality of structure’. Giddens differentiates social systems (macro structure) from institutions (structural meso level) or ‘institutionalized practices’; this enables the aimed description of issues fields as *medium* in which every communicative act is ‘realized’. Then, an issue field would be medium *and* result of communicative actions of journalists, PR-professionals and any other communicators—even corporations. Nevertheless, there remain two questions:

1. What’s first: macrostructure, modalities or (communication) processes?
2. How can the outer limits of this field be defined?

Ad question 1: The duality between structure and action, or more specific: between field and practice, is as well one of the basic components of Bourdieu’s field theory (Bourdieu, 1987; Bourdieu, Beister, & Schwibs, 2001). Bourdieu’s

fields can be described as configuration or constellation which contains a special macrostructure, organizational contexts, agents and their interests as well as their strategies to reach their goals (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu's fields are both, a *space of differences* and a *bunch of interactions and relations*: 'To think of fields means to think relational' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). On the one hand, Bourdieu defines multiple societal fields with distinct discourses; on the other hand, he describes the possibility of a shift of discourses from one field to another. For instance, "politicizing" means the discursive attachment of an issue to the political field. This shift as a dynamic moment is labelled as 'trajectoire' (Johnson, 1993); with it, every structure is only a 'snap-shot' in an ongoing process of *restructuration*; or with Giddens: modification and reproduction. This could be an answer to the first question of what's first, macrostructure, modalities or communication processes. There are social relations i.e., between a corporation and their stakeholder, which can be differentiated in 'fields'; but there are processes going on constantly which modify the structures. Fields are reproduced by a special balance or imbalance of power and reproduced because of a tendency to the maintenance of structure. Therefore, issue fields can be dominated by hegemonic arguments based on political or economic power structures (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 38; Benson, 1999, p. 482f). Besides, an issue can be brought up by corporations and drawn from the economic to the political field. This happened to CSR, as today it is an obligation for the big corporation to follow political guidelines (i.e., Agenda 21¹), i.e., CSR reportings are regulated by the GRI indices.² This "trajectoire" of CSR as originally corporate issue to other fields opens up the second question from above:

Ad 2: The second question was about the outer limits of an issue field. With Bourdieu, an issue field is a space structured by relations between two positions or poles (Bourdieu, 1987). Bourdieu's fields are dichotomous or 'chiastic' and are reproduced by the process of *discursive polarization*. The distance between the poles defines the borders (see Fig. 1).

A concept of issue fields inspired by Bourdieu leads to the assumption that the process of polarization is a condition for the maintenance of an issue field. Here, the consideration of frames as schemata which *define* an event, an occasion or circumstance (Entman, 1993; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; van Gorp, 2007) refines Bourdieu's term 'position' in discourses. Frames organize an issue and are therefore the necessary theoretical brick that can be complemented from communication science for the definition of an issue field presented here; frames define the width and the borders of an issue. This will be further explained in the following section.

¹<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>

²<https://www.globalreporting.org/Pages/default.aspx>

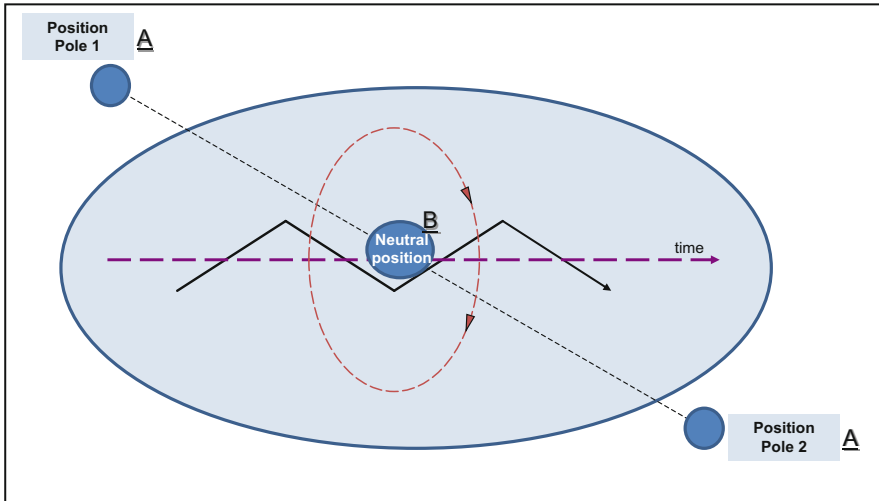


Fig. 1 Issue field and the distance between the poles

1.2 Issue Fields as ‘Event-Frame-Relation’

Related to the standard works of framing research (Entman, 1993, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1977/1980; Iyengar, 1991; Matthes, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991) two forms of frames can be distinguished, depending upon the level of abstraction. On the one hand several approaches work with a more generalized understanding of a frame in the sense of a selection principle or principle of emphasis (Gitlin, 1980); here the concept of Entman (1993), the description of framing as ‘problem definition’, ‘causal analysis’, ‘moral judgment’ and ‘remedy promotion’ should be noted (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). A methodological operationalization of these *master frames*, however, appears just as difficult as other concepts of holistic or generalist frames (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1992). On the other hand there are approaches which work with *issue-specific frames* (de Vreese, 2005) which seem to be a necessary complement to the described master frames (Weder, 2012). With Shah, Watts, Domke, and Fan (2002) it is assumed that each subject has different thematic frames. These issue specific frames are the “organizing central idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (Tankard et al., 1991, p. 11). So there are two complementary levels of framing:

- The master or macro level of emphasizing or application of *relevance* and *significance* on the one hand and
- The mesolevel on the other hand, the issue-specific frames which represent a special meaning, a position.

This complements the previously idea of an issue field conceptualized with Giddens and Bourdieu. In his concept of duality of structure Giddens describes *signification* as one of the basic structural elements and communication as the related processes of action or interaction (Giddens, 1984, p. 29). More concretely, events like a CSR activity leave frames like “the corporation does not support child labour” as “structural footprints” in the social or cultural context so that future events can be communicatively connected to this organizing element on a cognitive level. Therefore, an event can be described as stimulus for framing as a process of structuration. Once again it seems to be important, to distinguish between master frames as rules, organising principles of communication on a macro level and issue specific frames as positions in Bourdieu’s sense. Then, issue specific frames in the sense of positions can be defined as *modality of communication*. They determine the size and shape of an issue field. The core of an issue field can be described as ‘neutral’ and the *issue-specific frames* (different positions), as *controversial* (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 183; see again Fig. 1). This leads to the basic assumptions of this article:

1. The public sphere in general can be interpreted as *network of and for the communication of issues and opinions, positions or frames related to this issue*.
2. The existence of an issue field is dependent on an event or problem that activates communication about it and
3. The existence of an issue field is dependent on the *diversity and controversy of positions*.

Subsequently, the question discussed in the following section is: how does the new concept of an issue field helps to identify and explore ‘common sense’? In other words: is common sense a master frame which makes a special event relevant for further (public) communication or does common sense represent a dominant issue-specific frame (position) and with this the hegemonic position based on political and/or economic power? And what’s the learning for CSR communication if CSR is taken as issue and therefore content that is communicated by and about corporations?

2 Common Sense Issues Between Neutrality and Hegemony

“The facts of common sense are not particularly interesting” (ibid. 11). This statement contains two important aspects: Firstly common sense is related to facts (occasions, events, circumstances). Secondly the word ‘interesting’ relates the philosophical idea of common sense to communication processes and interest is about attention (Coleman, 1995, p. 250). If something is ‘interesting’ it affects people, it stimulates cognitive and with this communication processes. So the following discussion will show that communication research should consider issues

like Corporate Social Responsibility as common sense beliefs in the sense of a master frame of public communication.

2.1 Common Sense as ‘Neutral Position’?

Common Sense in the philosophical sense implies no special position. In his discussion of C.S. Pierce’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Communication, Bergman explains common sense beliefs as “vague beliefs, which are typically taken for granted and are for the time being ... beyond criticism, arise naturally from practices in which we try to make our way in the world” (Bergman, 2009, p. 258). But does this imply that common sense is similar to a neutral position in the core of an issue field as conceptualized above (see again Fig. 1)? “Common-sense beliefs are virtually always trivial in substance” (Rescher, 2005, p. 26), with it, common sense is something that is communicated implicitly, that is “intrinsically indefinite” but “valuable as such” (Bergman, 2009, p. 267). But this implies that common sense can not turn into a conflictual issue or in one or the other position. Common sense seems to be more like a *reference* for dichotomous positions at the outer limits of the issue field as well as for a neutral position in the core of the field. Reminding that issue fields above were defined by the poles of that field, “which represent the limits of acceptable discursive positions and identities according to the social norms of a given time and place” (Roper, 2005, p. 140), the examination of common sense shows the importance of considering the process of *referring to common sense* in interaction and communication processes. This understanding of common sense as an implicit knowledge which subcutaneously moves along with communication processes leads to the following question: If not the neutral core, is common sense similar to a hegemonic position at the outer limits of an issue field?

2.2 Common Sense as Hegemonic Position?

Issues are created around events “through the competition between the agents involved in [a field]” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 171f.). Thus, in many cases hegemonic structures of meaning can be diagnosed. Hegemony is mostly defined as “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). This actor-related, political interpretation can be completed by the definition of the creation of consent through discourse (Condit, 1994, p. 207). Applied to mass mediated communication processes Evans describes this process in the following way: “People and organizations are shaped by discursive forces,

and the media play a powerful role in that discourse” (Evans, 2002, p. 313).³ With Evans or Mumby (1997, p. 344f.) plurivocal negotiations can achieve hegemony. With that hegemony is not only a top-down domination but a dialectic relationship between groups, *their positions* and their own degree of power; so control (and hegemony) develops through negotiation and accommodation (Evans, 2002, p. 313). Hegemony and consensus sometimes are not easy to differentiate.

On the one hand consensus is the basis for dominant positions with hegemonic character and they are legitimated through consensus (Hall, 1999). On the other hand consensus mediates hegemony “between the individual and the exercise of choice, and hegemony permeates the structures within which choices are made possible” (Jenks, 2005, p. 83), based on the above presented idea of issue fields. This implies that common sense is comparable to a dominant position. Hegemony in particular is conceptualized as not lying on the level of meaning, opinion or different positions, but as a corpus of practises (modalities) and expectations (*habitus*), and so as a tool to order and understand the world and human being (Williams, 1983, p. 190f.). With this, common sense could be explored as a hegemonic structure which can work as a general frame or the ‘reference point’ for different discourses in different (issue) fields, mentioned above. Then, common sense cannot be put on the same level with a neutral or hegemonic and dominant position in the issue field; common sense functions on a macro level and constrains as well as enables communication processes with issue specific frames (positions). Common sense is described as the ‘secret agreement’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 36) among independent observers, as consensually agreed beliefs which will thereby emerge as judgementally secure. Different ideals or concepts can form a new, unified discourse which could be accepted as common sense (Hall, 1980). Common sense beliefs are not irresistible, they can change. Thus, common sense moves subcutaneously along with communication. But it can be turned into an explicitly communicated issue. This in other words: A public debate about common sense beliefs is theoretically possible.

2.3 Corporate Responsibility as Hegemonic Structure of Meaning

The theoretical exploration presented above had the result that common sense is neither a special position or meaning nor a neutral position; hence, it can be described as a hegemonic cognitive structure which constrains communication processes and human action in general. Is responsibility such a kind of structure?

³Generally, in communication studies media are perceived as playing an important role related to power and power generating processes in the society (Hall, 1999); they are understood as influential, constructive part of the societal consensus.

Assuming that common sense moves along with every communication process but can be turned into an explicitly communicated issue, the issue of “Corporate Social Responsibility” and related concepts for the administration of this responsibility by entities and individuals is a perfect example to further explore common sense issues. Thinking about corporate responsibility, the allocation as well as taking of responsibility by an organization can be described as common sense belief. Nevertheless, the activities of taking responsibility are divergent, the communication about those activities is not common sense. There are various frame and arguments of and about CSR activities in the media but in the organizational communication (Marketing, PR, social media communication etc.) as well.

More specifically: responsibility as a philosophical term relates to the agency for a person or activity; it can be conceptualized retrospectively, if an action has already be performed, or prospectively, if there is an action or relationship coming up (Fischer, 1986; Weder, 2012). The moral—more than purely causal—responsibility of organisations is defined as “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper and appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 572). So even if there are heterogeneous interpretations of collective responsibilities (Corlett, 2001) and the so called “Corporate Social Responsibility” (overview in Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008; Werther & Chandler, 2006; see also Ihlen et al., 2011; Karmasin & Weder, 2008; May et al., 2007), there is a *generalized belief* or *common sense belief* that every action and every relation between individuals, collectives and individuals as well as between collectives and collectives implies responsibilities (Weder, 2012). It is ‘common sense’ and as such “requires no such extraordinary means . . . there is no knowledge antecedent acquired” (Bergman, 2009, p. 253; see also Rescher, 2005, p. 32). But related to this basic belief there exist *different positions about how to realize responsibility*, about how the idea of perception of this responsibility can be implemented and administered in/by an organization or individuals. Examples related to the common sense belief of the responsibility of entities (corporate responsibility) are issue specific frames like the following: “CSR implies economic profit” as one pole and “responsible behaviour and corporate policy exclude each other” (Weder, 2012). The different frames of organizational behaviour produce and reproduce the common sense belief ‘responsibility of entities’ in the way that they *define the CSR issue field*; in other words: internally and externally communicated CSR content. Thus, firstly, an *integrated organization of CSR communication* is needed; secondly, an *“integrated framing”* in the sense of a coordinated and attuned argumentation of corporate responsibility and related activities seems to be a condition for the explicit communication of CSR in the public.

3 Conclusion

The article started with a conceptualization of issue fields with a synthesis of Giddens idea of duality of structure, and Bourdieu's definition of fields over the distance of positions and frame concepts which are applied in communication research. Related to the basic understanding of public communication and discourses as event-related framing, it was possible to make a difference between two structural levels of an issue field: the macro structural context and the related positions with issue specific frames as their structural 'footprint'. The basic assumption of this article: the bigger the distance between different positions related to a special context, conceptualized as 'communicated frames', the more intense are the communication processes about an issue; as well, the more intense is the 'negotiation process', the discourse and with that the attention of the media and the public.

With the here presented theoretical framework common sense can be understood as subcutane structure of meaning of communication processes. Common sense beliefs are described as social norms or (ethical) principles that are not controversially debated itself; but common sense functions as macro structural context and reference for (controversial) discourses. As it was mentioned above, *controversial frames activate communicative action and interaction*; subsequently, the *value negotiation process* (or in Bourdieu's words: the fight about positions and the power of definition of an event or issue) is the stronger and with that gets more attention, the more controversial the issue specific frames are. There is no controversy about common sense, *but* a controversial discussion *related to* common sense beliefs can reproduce this common sense. Therefore, *an integrated approach to CSR communication in general and framing of CSR is required*.

The limitation of the article is that it is a theoretical discussion only; the debated concepts need further examples and empirical research. Nevertheless, the implication of this article for future communication theory and CSR research in particular is firstly to consider responsibility of entities as common sense belief in the sense of *invisible macrostructures of issues* which can make single positions more significant. Secondly, common sense itself can be identified a hegemonic structure of meaning, created and reproduced by actors (communicators) with the result of being dominant in the societal communication processes. Related to the presented example of CSR this leads to the following conclusion: if companies communicate explicitly that they are responsible in their business reports year after year, the common sense belief that entities are responsible is reproduced and therefore become an implicit assumption which affects future communication processes of the organization itself as well as for other organizations. This again implies the integrated approach to CSR communication, theoretically proven above.

4 Exercise and Reflective Questions

1. Please try to define Common Sense and discuss its relevance for communication studies.
2. Describe the relationship between an event and framing (in the media).
3. Name three common frames for CSR activities and think about others.
4. Discussion: Is CSR newsworthy for the media? If so, under which conditions do the media report CSR activities?
5. How far can CSR be described as “hegemonic structure of meaning”?

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