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# Finding Common Ground: CSR and Media Responsibility

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## 1 MR and CSR of Media Companies

Media companies have a ‘dual responsibility’. For one, they produce and distribute media products intended to inform and entertain the population. This entails a set of duties that may be termed *Media Responsibility* (MR). On the other hand media companies, just like any other company, have to be profitable, as well as living up to social and ecological standards. These related duties may be designated *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) (see Altmeyen, 2011).

At the same time, media companies are confronted with a twofold structural change. On the one hand, the media sector is always in transition. Some changes are radical and drastic; quite a few are slow, incremental and creeping. The changes may be conceptualized by the keywords tabloidization, digitalization, commercialization, convergence, concentration, liberalization, and economization. As the media sector changes, we are seeing fewer media companies concentrating more market power. In the Swiss print media sector the three major media companies, Tamedia, Ringier and the NZZ media groups, currently control 79.3% of the market share (see FöG, 2014, pp. 252–258). The concern here is that decreasing diversity in the media sector lowers the quality of the media. As a consequence, media companies are increasingly being accused of neglecting one of their core responsibilities, to inform the population, in their pursuit of increased profits (see Habermas, 2008; Kramer & Imhof, 2011). On the other hand, we see a moralization of the business world. Companies are expected to not only feel obligated to their shareholders, but also to their many stakeholders (see

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Freeman, 1984). Firms are not only expected to be profitable, but also to meet social and ecological demands (see Elkington, 1998).

Due to their MR, media companies remained for a long time relatively untroubled by calls for CSR. This has changed, with the responsibilities of media companies now being closely examined (see Altmeyen, 2011; Trommershausen, 2011; Winkler, 2016). From the point of view of organizational communication research, the question raised is: how do media companies use their MR and CSR strategically?

Formulating a response to this question requires a social-theoretical framework that brings together the findings of organizational communications research, CSR research and MR research in a comprehensive manner. The research questions are: What is MR? And what is CSR?

The aim of this paper is to develop a relevant framework that may be fruitfully put to work for further empirical research. The most suitable tool here, as will be shown in due course, is a close look at Giddens' theories of structuration and late modernity. These have already proved useful in the analysis of media companies (see Altmeyen, 2006, p. 44). We unlock the potential of Giddens' theories by conceptualizing MR and CSR as social practices (see Giddens, 1984, p. xvii). It is in the process of ascribing between persons that MR and CSR become concrete phenomena. The aim of this paper is to develop a basis model of MR and CSR by referring to Giddens' concepts of the duality of structure and action as well as the double hermeneutic.

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## 2 The Organization of Media Companies

For many decades the fields of social science and ethics have debated the question of whether organizations are actors (see Crane & Matten, 2010, pp. 46–51; Douglas, 1986, pp. 9–19; French, 1979). The answer provided by the theory of structuration is unequivocal: only persons (to be precise: entities with a corporeal existence) have a consciousness and are able to act. In contrast, neither organizations nor any kind of collective can be agents (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 5–8; 220–221). While Giddens (1984) concedes that it might, in certain circumstances, be expedient to simply use phrases like: 'the media company is acting strategically' or 'the management has decided', social scientists should never lose sight of the difference between reductive, everyday descriptions and scientific concepts (see Giddens, 1984, p. 221; Theis-Berglmair, 2003, p. 240).

According to Giddens (1984), organizations are social structures, and social structures do not exist independently from people in space and time. In fact, they only exist in the minds of people as "memory traces" (p. 25). Organizations represent a particular kind of social structure: bundles of rules and resources safeguarding and processing information; a bureaucratically ordered interaction of people and technologies (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 199–201; 1985, p. 13). As a collection of both material and immaterial resources, organizations represent 'power containers' (see Giddens, 1985, p. 13; Poole & McPhee, 2005, p. 179) for authorized persons (e.g. owners, managers, employees) that, from the perspective

of the concept of the duality of structure and action, both enables and limits the scope of their actions. Organizations constitute both the result and the medium of human action (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 25–28; 199–206).

But what makes media companies different from other organizations? The particularity of media companies lies in the fact that they are bound to the twin goals, respectively the values of ‘publicity’ and ‘economy’. The theory of structuration allows us to conceptualize publicity and economy as structural principles. According to Giddens (1984), structural principles make human action possible, while at the same time limiting it—in such an extensive invention in space and time that they remain nearly impervious to human action. Structural principles are caught in a contradictory relationship with each other (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 180–185). The contradictions between publicity and economy that media companies are exposed to finds expression in many pairs of opposites: media companies produce cultural and economic goods (see Heinrich, 2010, pp. 21–22); are received by people who are both citizens and consumers (see Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005); and sell both information and entertainment (see Gershon, 2000, p. 81). According to Altmeppen (2006), in media companies this contradiction manifests itself in the organizational separation between journalistically-oriented editorial departments and business-oriented media management. This gives media companies a bicameral system: while the editorial departments are geared towards providing relevant topics for public communication, media management aims to increase competitiveness and profits by distributing this information. The editorial section and media management are interlinked through media companies, resulting in a ‘co-orientation’. This co-orientation means neither balance nor symmetry. On the contrary, in situations of conflict representatives from media management usually hold more power to make decisions (see Altmeppen, 2006, pp. 201–208; Altmeppen & Arnold, 2013, pp. 42–46).

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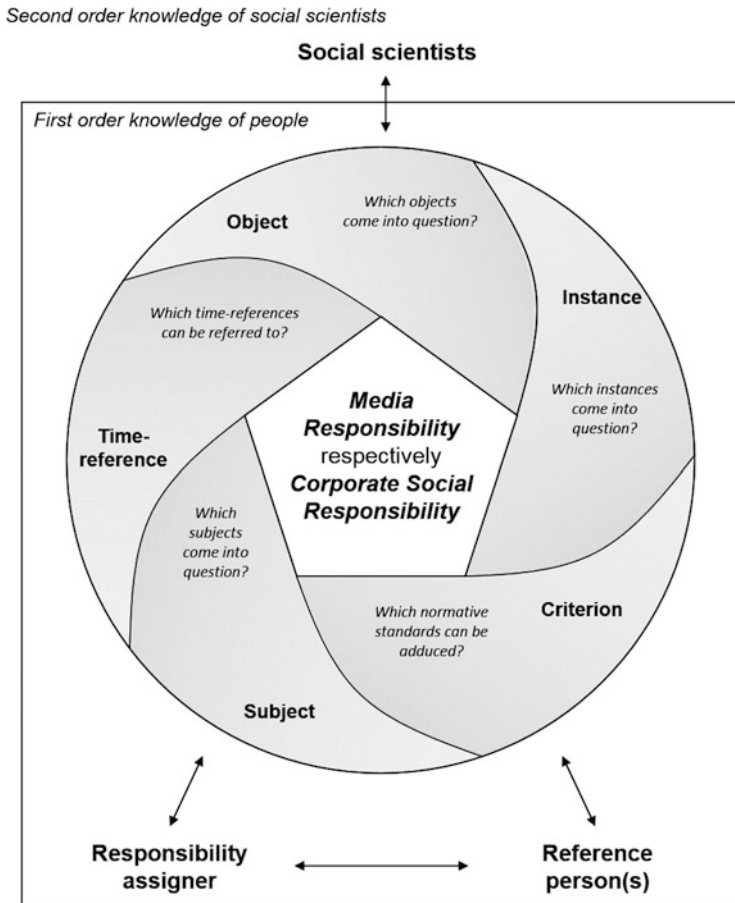
### **3 Double Hermeneutic and Defining MR and CSR**

#### **3.1 Developing the Basic Model of Ascribing Responsibility**

There are many definitions of MR and CSR. Dahlsrud (2008) for instance has compiled 37 different CSR definitions (see Dahlsrud, 2008). However, the problem with surfeits such as this is that they tend to hinder understanding just as much as a lack of definition would. In the words of the editors of the ‘Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility’:

For a subject that has been studied for so long, it is unusual to discover that researchers still do not share a common definition or a set of core principles, that they still argue about what it means to be socially responsible (Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008, p. 4).

What we hear regarding MR is in a similar vein (see Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2004). The only consensus here is around the lack of consensus. In order to find



**Fig. 1** Framework to analyze the social practice of ascribing MR resp. CSR

suitable definitions to answer the research question, we must first ask: what are the reasons for the continued lack of consensual definitions for MR and CSR?

Applying Giddens' (1990) theory of late modernity, we can say that definitions, which are able to generate a consensus, remain absent not *in spite of* but *because of* continued scientific efforts. One particularity of late modernity is institutional reflexivity. Today, no knowledge or social practice is exempt from being questioned. This also means that scientific research might produce knowledge, but no certainties, because reflexivity implies a constant revision of social activities (see Giddens, 1990, pp. 38, 139).

Under these conditions, in order to develop a viable understanding of MR and CSR that is as free from contradictions as possible, a basic model of ascribing responsibility is laid out in a number of steps. We firstly draw on the available literature on responsibility from social sciences, as well as the theories of structuration

and late modernity, to develop a basic framework of the social practice of responsibility ascriptions (see Fig. 1). Examining the available research on MR and CSR, this basic model allows us subsequently to deduce definitions of MR and CSR.

1. First of all we need to clarify what is meant by ‘responsibility.’ Despite responsibility being an everyday phenomenon, or indeed because of that fact, responsibility is difficult to define. Giddens (1999) comments: “As it is used today, ‘responsibility’ is an interestingly ambiguous or multi-layered term” (p. 8). In this paper we understand responsibility as a five-element relational concept: Somebody (*subject*) taking guilt in a retrospective sense, or, in a prospective sense, an obligation or duty (*time reference*) for something (*object*) towards somebody (*instance*) on the grounds of specific normative standards (*criterion*) (see Schütz, 1964; Hübenenthal & Wils, 2009).
2. From a Giddensian perspective, responsibility is a social practice: responsibility only becomes apparent through the social practice of ascribing. This means that responsibility as a phenomenon in space and time cannot be imagined without a *person ascribing responsibility* to at least one *relatable person*, conveying the five-element relation of responsibility within a social relationship (see Giddens, 1984, p. 116). Pincoffs (1988) argues in a similar vein: “What responsibility might be outside of or apart from this practice, I have no idea” (p. 828). It is only in the social practice of ascribing between people that responsibility becomes a concrete reality of social life.
3. It is precisely in the “illumination of concrete processes of social life” that Giddens (1984) sees the main remit of the social sciences (see Giddens, 1984, p. xvii). According to the theory of structuration, ascribing responsibility is not limited to communication, but is always connected to action. This can take place through facial expressions, gestures, oral or written statements, or other bodily expressions on the part of the person ascribing the responsibility (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 78–83; 1993, pp. 93–99; see also Goffman, 1959, pp. 167–207). A person may, for instance, ascribe responsibility to themselves or other subjects by ‘leading by example’ or by ‘letting actions speak louder than words’. Conversely, that person may act responsibly through language alone, for instance by ‘standing up verbally for a weaker person’ in front of other people in a risky situation. Some persons possess more power than others to shape these responsibilities and other “realities”. Power in all its forms plays a central role in Giddens’ theories. He points out that power is intrinsically tied to human agency. His conception is different from that of Weber (1984), who has argued that power only exists when resistance of other persons is overcome. Giddens argues that there are two sources of power in social interactions: allocative resources (e.g., wealth, technologies) and authoritative resources (e.g. reputation) (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 14–25).
4. Structuration theory sees only human beings as able to ascribe responsibility. However, people ascribing responsibility do have recourse to frameworks of significance (interpretative schemata), where not only human beings, but also groups, collectives, organizations and creatures of a higher order may sensibly

be perceived as actors and, as such, as being capable of responsibility (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 30, 220). At the same time, authorized persons may speak in the name of a group, collective or organization, creating the illusion that those entities are ascribing responsibility to themselves. For instance, on the website of Ringier AG, under the heading ‘Corporate Responsibility’, we read: “Ringier AG consistently strives to lessen its burden on the environment” and “Ringier engages in social commitments, focusing on issues that are closely related to its business activities” (Ringier, 2015). Goodpaster and Matthews (1982) see a useful “moral projection” in the idea that views companies as actors, making it easier for people to assert claims towards them (see Goodpaster & Matthews, 1982, p. 136). This idea of company as actors has hardened over time and lead to the institutionalized construction of company as a “person” by virtue of law.

5. This shows that social scientists deal with a “double hermeneutic”: They interpret on the basis of basic scientific frameworks how people interpret their world. In the words of Giddens (1984, 1993), this means that the definitions and concepts of social sciences always represent “second-order” significance frameworks referencing “first-order” significance frameworks, which derive from the social practice of ascribing (see Giddens, 1984, p. 284; 1993, pp. 84–84). Achieving a social-science related concept of MR and CSR and establishing definitions of MR and CSR (second-order significance frameworks) requires adopting the first-order significance frameworks of people engaged in social practice.
6. Another factor needs to be taken into consideration when determining scientific second-degree significance frameworks, namely that the knowledge of the social sciences, for its part, sometimes enters into these significance frameworks in social practice: The point here is not that there is no stable world to be perceived, but that the knowledge about this world contributes to its instability or inconsistency. Giddens calls this the *circulation of social knowledge in double hermeneutic*: Social scientific ideas can re-enter into society (see Giddens, 1990 pp. 53–54). Herein lies another reason for the lack of ‘one-solution-fits-all’ definitions on MR and CSR (see Marrewijk, 2003). When social science concepts of MR and CSR are taken up in social practice, their original meaning is changed, requiring a readjustment of the definitions. Thus, there can be no final definitions of MR and CSR.

### 3.2 Defining MR and CSR Ascriptions

The issue then is not how to go about finding the only two correct definitions for MR and CSR. The question is rather: how may we as social scientists establish definitions of MR and CSR that are comprehensible? Defining MR and CSR requires us to examine the first-degree significance frameworks and to translate them into the significance frameworks of the social sciences. In additional steps we

may then use previous reflections to define the ascribing of MR and CSR. This entails integrating well-known approaches from MR and CSR research into the basic model of ascribing responsibility.

7. Ascribing *Media Responsibility* is a specific form of human action distinguished by the fact that the assigner acts with the intention of conveying information to one or several persons. Namely, in the sense of conveying information according to the five-element relational term of responsibility, whereby people, professional groups, or organizations (or their units) from the media sector (*subject*) (see Dimmick & Coit, 1982; McQuail, 2010, pp. 278–280) are obliged to ensure (*prospective time reference*) (see McQuail, 2003, p. 195) media structures (e.g. diversity of providers) or media content (e.g. media quality), which increase society's social, political or cultural well-being (*object*) (see van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 2003, p. 202; McQuail, 2010, p. 165); towards those affected by it (e.g. citizens or recipients) (*instance*), on the basis of normative standards that may vary in their degree of obligation (*criterion*) (see Hodges, 1986; McQuail, 1997, p. 516).
8. Ascribing *Corporate Social Responsibility* is a specific form of human action distinguished by the fact that the assigner acts with the intention of imparting information to one or several persons, and particularly imparting information in regard to the five-element relational term of responsibility, whereby companies or their managers (*subjects*) (see Carroll, 1991, p. 42) have the obligation (*prospective time reference*) to ensure profit and competitiveness in the economic sense; or social, political, or cultural well-being in the social sense; or, in the ecological sense, for the conservation of the natural environment (*object*) (see Elkington, 1998, pp. 69–96); towards those affected by it (e.g. shareholders or stakeholders) (*instance*) (see Freeman, 1984), on the basis of normative standards that may vary in their degree of obligation (*criterion*) (see Carroll, 1991, p. 42).

These definitions draw the outer boundaries of the second-degree social science framework, within which, in social practice, MR and CSR are assigned in a meaningful way. In the social practice of assigning MR or CSR it is rare to find every single member of this relationship explicated. Nor is this crucial, but the person assigning responsibility is able, if the need arises to name the relational elements of his or her responsibility ascription (see Giddens, 1993, pp. 81–82).

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## 4 Media Companies' Strategic Use of MR and CSR

Our reflections thus far lead to the following problem: On the one hand, it was asked how media companies use their MR and CSR strategically, on the other, it was argued that media companies are not actors capable of strategic thinking. According to structuration theory, only people can use MR and CSR in a strategic way (see

Giddens, 1984, pp. 5–8; 220–221). This inconsistency can be resolved by referring to the basic framework of the social practice of responsibility ascriptions (see Fig. 1).

We have seen that media companies' self-ascriptions of MR and CSR are illusions within the first-degree frame of significance, reproduced by authorized persons (such as managers, company spokespersons) representing a media company or its organizational units as a responsible subject in the sense of the MR and CSR definitions referenced.

9. It is important here to establish the fact that concrete ascriptions of MR and CSR do not necessarily involve strategic intention. According to Giddens' (1984) stratification model of action, people may also ascribe responsibilities for non-strategic, non-instrumental reasons. People may even ascribe responsibilities for their personal disadvantage if they are convinced of the moral truth of their ascription (see Giddens, 1984, p. 5). On the other hand, the lack of a strategic intention is improbable with those specific MR and CSR assignments performed by authorized members in the name of their respective media companies. For the authorized media management this is a social space of institutional reflexivity, where one's own practices are always scrutinized as to their efficacy. In companies, the mantra is that there is always the option of improving things by employing a different method. In the words of modern organizational semantics: workflows may always be shaped to be 'more rational' or 'more strategic' (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 199–201; 1990, pp. 38–40).

The strategies dealing with the illusion that companies are responsible agents fall within the remit of PR. From PR research we can learn that concepts of PR—and concepts used synonymously, such as publicity or communication management—stands for activities with strategic intentions in the interest of their own organization, or that of a client.

Media companies' strategic self-ascriptions of MR and CSR take place in interactions and social relations between the members of a media company (e.g. media managers, PR experts) and stakeholder groups. According to structuration theory, actions and ascriptions in social relations and interactions reproduce and modify structures of signification, domination and legitimacy (see Giddens, 1984, pp. 16–28; Röttger, 2005, p. 14). Bearing this in mind, and bringing in Zerfaß (2014), the targeted dimensions of strategic MR and CSR self-ascriptions may be broken down further: in terms of the *communication/signification* dimension the goals may lie in disseminating information and divulging images; in terms of the *power/domination* dimension the goals could lie in securing allocative resources (money through a competitive edge; profitability and liquidity in particular) and authoritative resources (e.g. reputation and confidence). As regards the *sanction/legitimacy* dimension, the goals may lie in securing the 'license-to-operate' through acceptance or a favorable legal framework. In strategic MR and CSR ascriptions, all dimensions always come into play, if to variable degrees (see Zerfaß, 2014, pp. 28–29).



## 5 Conclusions and Outlook

So how can we conceptualize how media companies go about using MR and CSR in their strategies? In conclusion, the answer is that within media companies authorized persons (managers or PR experts, for instance) perform strategic MR and CSR ascriptions in the name of their own organization or its units, based on PR expertise, in order to reproduce or modify the social structures in the interest of the organization or its units. Strategic MR and CSR ascriptions aim to adapt both the organizational structures and those of the stakeholders in the interest of the media company.

Based on the theory of structuration and the theory of late modernity, this theoretical framework, as well as the definitions developed, allow the empirical analysis of media companies' strategic approach to MR and CSR.

Just to point to a few options, the two definitions of MR and CSR allow the use of interviews or content analyses to find out which obligations and duties are ascribed to media companies by their own organization members or members of stakeholder groups. They also allow the examination of the impact of certain MR and CSR ascriptions on the target variables in the dimensions of signification, domination and legitimacy. For instance, there is speculation about the fact that extensive CSR ascriptions of companies do not increase their legitimacy, but rather tend to bring about the opposite, due to the skeptical attitudes of the persons involved (see Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). They also allow the determination of which persons and professional groups within media companies and within stakeholder groups are in charge of ascribing responsibility (e.g. managers, CEOs, PR experts, marketing experts).

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