

The Emergence, Variation, and Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Public Sphere, 1980–2004: The Exposure of Firms to Public Debate

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Abstract This study examined the emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a public issue over 25 years using a content analysis of two national newspapers and seven regional, geographically-dispersed newspapers in the U.S. The present study adopted a comprehensive definition encompassing all four CSR dimensions: economic, ethical, legal, and philanthropic. This study examined newspaper editorials, letters to the editor, op-ed columns, news analyses, and guest columns for three aspects: media attention, media prominence, and media valence. Results showed an increase in the number of opinion pieces covering CSR issues over the 25-year period. The prominence of each of the four CSR dimensions varied over time. Each of the four CSR dimensions had its moment of media prominence when it was more important than the other dimensions. The most prevalent valence of the opinion pieces was negative; the volume of negative pieces increased over the 25 years, whereas the number of opinions with positive, neutral, and mixed tones showed little change over time. The study concludes by tracing the implications of the role of the news media for business ethics research.

Keywords Columns · Corporate social responsibility · Editorials · Letters to the editor · Media · Media attention · Media prominence · Media valence · Newspaper · Public opinion

Introduction

Along with increasing globalization and greater environmental and social awareness, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is gaining considerable scholarly attention. The Enron scandal of 2002 aroused the public's attention as well, and corporate ethics and CSR in general have become more significant issues than ever. Although the forms and goals of CSR practices are varied, a growing number of corporations have committed to CSR activities. Over 80% of *Fortune* 500 companies have a separate section on their websites dedicated to CSR (Capriotti and Moreno 2007; Esrock and Leichty 1998, 2000). The 2008 KPMG International Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting showed that nearly 80% of the largest 250 corporations worldwide issued CSR reports, and one of the major trends was the degree to which the inclusion of CSR information in financial reports increased from 2005 to 2008 (KPMG 2008).

Despite this growing attention to CSR and its value, previous studies on the topic have several limitations. First, the studies looked at CSR almost exclusively from the corporations' point of view, asking whether an investment in CSR would bring any return to a firm, how intangible benefits should be measured, how CSR practices should be evaluated, and how CSR could be practiced successfully (e.g., Brown and Dacin 1997; Fombrun 1996; Grunig 2006; Hall 2006; McWilliams and Siegel 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). As public expectations form the standards for CSR within a social context, focusing only on the

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corporate side of the subject exhibits a corporate bias rather than a public point of view. Second, few previous studies have examined the news media's reporting on the topic of CSR.¹ One of the news media's functions is forming the public's perceptions of organizations (Carroll and McCombs 2003; Deephouse and Heugens 2009), particularly for organizations with whom audiences do not have firsthand personal knowledge, familiarity, or relationships (Deephouse 2000; Dutton and Dukerich 1991).² Third, previous research on CSR has only examined limited time periods (e.g., Cho and Hong 2008; Kim and Reber 2008; Kiousis et al. 2007). The topic of CSR, however, needs to be examined and understood in a broader historical context. The public's expectations of corporations are not static; rather, CSR is an evolving concept. Thus, a longitudinal study will be of benefit, as it will reflect a much more dynamic conception of CSR.

To fill in these gaps, the present study will first review the literature on CSR, focusing on the nature of CSR and the importance of the media in relation to CSR, and will then examine how the news media have discussed the CSR of individual firms over the past 25 years. Instead of confining the scope of CSR to a narrow definition, this study will adopt a comprehensive approach to CSR, including economic, ethical, legal, and philanthropic dimensions (Carroll 2006). The final section will discuss the implications and limitations of the present study.

Literature Review

The Emergence and Variation of Definitions of CSR

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing throughout the 1970s, scholars proposed a variety of definitions of CSR

¹ We have limited our study to the news media, but clearly, with the advent of the Internet, other forms of mass and social media may influence public perceptions. For instance, Hunter et al. (2008) observed that publics familiar with an organization or a crisis may consult stakeholder media that present alternate viewpoints to those the news media provide. Such alternate views may be just as influential, if not more so, and may have significant impacts on organizational reputation and options for mobilization (Hunter et al. 2008).

² Media coverage does not necessarily translate into public attention (see, e.g., Neuman 1990). Neuman (1990) distinguished between "obtrusive" and "unobtrusive" issues. For example, Islam and Deegan (2010) noted how inflation is an obtrusive issue because members of the public become aware of it every time they go to the store; they do not need the media to report statistics to realize inflation affects them. On the other hand, unobtrusive issues include foreign events which the public cannot experience or know without the media functioning as a conduit (Einwiller et al. 2010; Zucker 1978). Islam and Deegan (2010) and Einwiller et al. (2010) argue that the media's agenda-setting effect is most apparent in relation to unobtrusive events such as CSR.

(e.g., Bowen 1953; Carroll 1979; Davis and Blomstrom 1975; Mason 1960; McGuire 1963), and such definitions have continued to evolve over time (e.g., Carroll 1991, 2006; Epstein 1987). Earlier definitions focused on basic aspects of CSR such as achieving corporations' economic objectives and meeting legal standards, whereas more recent definitions have placed emphasis on social benefits and stakeholders' welfare. For instance, McGuire (1963) placed social responsibility in the context of economic and legal objectives, observing that "the idea of social responsibility supposes that the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations, but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations" (p. 144). Later, Epstein (1987) included the concepts of stakeholders and ethics in the definition, on the grounds that "corporate social responsibility relates primarily to achieving outcomes from organizational decisions concerning specific issues or problems which (by some normative standard) have beneficial effects upon pertinent corporate stakeholders" (p. 104).

Though a number of definitions of CSR exist, one of the most comprehensive and widely used is Carroll's (1979) description of CSR as entailing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibility (see Fig. 1). Specifically, *economic responsibility* requires that a business be profitable and produce goods and services which are desirable in a society. Monitoring employees' productivity or customer complaints are examples of activities signifying economic responsibility. *Legal responsibility* is meeting society's expectations as established by law. Training programs about sexual harassment and fairness in the workplace represent initiatives aimed at fostering legal responsibility. *Ethical responsibilities* require that businesses follow the modes of conduct considered to be morally right. Codes of ethics help businesses meet their ethical responsibilities. Finally, *philanthropic responsibilities* reflect the common

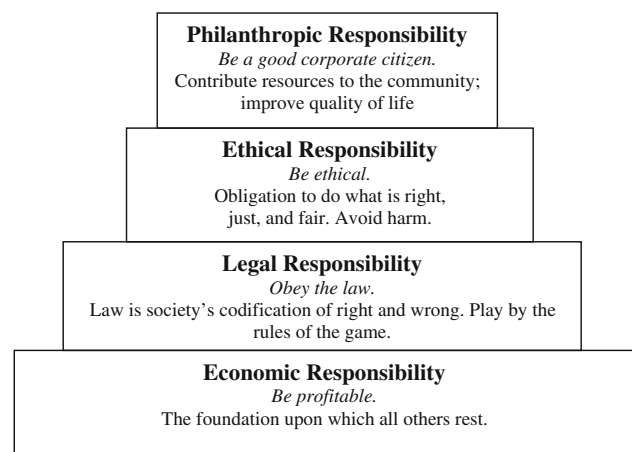


Fig. 1 The pyramid of corporate social responsibility (CSR). *Source:* Carroll (1991)

desire to see businesses actively involved in the betterment of society beyond their economic, legal, and ethical responsibilities. Work-family programs, corporate volunteerism, and donations to cultural organizations are examples of philanthropic initiatives. The distinction between ethical responsibilities and philanthropic responsibilities is that the latter typically are not expected in a moral or an ethical sense. For instance, communities desire and expect a business to contribute its money, facilities, and employee time to humanitarian programs or purposes, but they do not consider a firm unethical even if it does not provide such services at the desired levels.

Using such a comprehensive concept of CSR improves our understanding of CSR trends over time, since CSR is an evolving concept. Most current studies, however, focus on only one or two aspects of CSR, such as ethical and philanthropic responsibility (e.g., David et al. 2005; Hung 2005; Wang 2007).

The Evolution of CSR

CSR is a socially constructed value, and legitimacy is a core principle both for defining CSR and for determining the success of CSR activities (cf. Brown and Dacin 1997; David et al. 2005; Grunig 1979). Suchman (1995) described legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Accordingly, the standards for CSR differ by social context, and corporations can survive only when their activities meet the expectations of stakeholders and social norms. Fombrun (2005) demonstrated that each country had different criteria for CSR prizes and awards, CSR reports, CSR-related regulations, and CSR guidelines. David et al.’s (2005) study of consumer reactions to CSR initiatives found that consumers’ purchase intentions were related to whether a company’s ethics record exceeded their expectations. Similarly, Cho and Hong (2008) found that the public tends to be cynical toward CSR activities after a crisis, and that the more famous the company, the more likely there will be cynical comments about its CSR activities. It is important, therefore, for corporations to know the public’s expectations or social norms.

The conceptualization of CSR has gradually evolved as the public’s expectations have changed over time (Carroll 1999; Waddock 2004; Wartick and Cochran 1985; Wood 1991). Brown (2008), in his historical study of CSR, observed that

CSR arose, at least initially, not as a model example of organizational proactivity, but rather as reactions to crises. CSR was triggered by the cratering of

public opinion—the declining perception of major corporations, among a whole range of other economically, socially, culturally and politically dominant institutions. (p. 3)

In the 1970s, the idea of the firm as a social actor began to be accepted, and thus expectations for corporations to respond to social issues and demands for ethical behavior emerged (Clark 2000). At that time, however, such phenomena at that time were not yet as widespread as they are today. Grunig’s (1979) research showed that survey respondents did not believe businesses should be involved in social problems such as education, support of charities, or the decay of cities unless they were directly related to business matters. Now, however, corporations are expected to perform in all four dimensions of CSR, emphasizing a higher level of, and more proactive, responsibility (Cho and Hong 2008; Golob and Bartlett 2007; Hunter et al. 2008; Klein et al. 2004; O’Connor et al. 2008).

The News Media and the Entrance of CSR into Public Debate

The news media enable issues to enter the public sphere through their molding and mirroring of public opinion (Carroll and McCombs 2003; Deephouse and Heugens 2009; Gans 2005; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Overholser and Jamieson 2005; Patterson and Seib 2005; Scheufele et al. 2011). Lippmann saw the primary role of the press as a signaler, “alerting the public to important developments as soon as possible after they happen” (Patterson and Seib 2005, p. 192). Dickson and Eckman (2008) articulated the media’s role in constructing an issue as a social problem and examined how perceptions about the issue become shared through the media. For instance, primary claim-makers—usually, experts on an issue—rely on the media in their efforts to expand their claims. Once the media take up the issue, the information is shared with wider audience. Only a few studies, however, have examined the discussion of CSR in the media (Buhr and Grafström, 2007; Carroll 2011a, b; Hamilton 2003). Hamilton (2003), for example, showed that in the text of *The New York Times*, few articles used the term “corporate social responsibility” from 1900 through the 1960s. In the early 1970s, there was a spike of coverage using the term, with stories focusing on consumer advocate Ralph Nader, pollution, and shareholder actions surrounding CSR debates.

The newsworthiness of an issue, by its nature, has a life-cycle. Rather than being stable, an issue rises and falls over time (Zyglidopoulos 2003). Deephouse and Heugens (2009) have explained that “the newsworthiness of an item is likely to decline in the longer run, due to the roles that novelty and significance play in constituting newsworthiness” (p. 545).

Newsworthiness and media prominence can also vary based on whether the news covering an event was positive or negative for a firm, because people tend to remember negative news longer (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).³

The issue of CSR has fluctuated in the news media, but it has also evolved. Hamilton (2003) showed that, though the use of the term “corporate social responsibility” declined in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* after its initial spike in the early 1970s, it remained much higher than the 1950s and 1960s’ level. Hannah and Zatzick (2008) found that there has been a significant increase in the U.S. business news coverage of issues of ethics in corporate leadership.

Moreover, the prominence of an issue at a certain point can vary depending on the relative importance of the issue. Because of the limitation of the size and scope of news coverage, any one issue competes with many other issues (Deephouse and Heugens 2009; McCombs and Zhu 1995). Scholars have therefore endeavored to reveal the factors that influence the generation of CSR news. Though the determinants that produce CSR news are poorly understood, a few studies have suggested that primary claim-makers, consisting of experts on an issue (Gan, 2006), or infomediaries—“formal organizations that provide mediated information to audiences” (Deephouse and Heugens 2009, p. 542)—can encourage the professional news media to report on CSR dimensions. In addition, events such as corporate scandal or corporate misdeeds can trigger the public’s attention to focus on business ethics (Hannah and Zatzick 2008).

Such media attention and the prominence of an issue can be understood as components of a broader concept, *media salience*. Kioussis (2004) explained that media salience is composed of three dimensions: *attention*, *prominence*, and *valence*. He defined *media attention* as “media awareness of an object, usually gauged by the sheer volume of stories or space dedicated to topics in newspapers, television news, and so on” (Kioussis 2004, p. 74). This dimension can be particularly useful in capturing the trend of an issue over time, as in the present study. In contrast, *media prominence* emphasizes the relative importance of an issue, and, according to Kioussis, can be gaged by the placement and position of an issue within a media text. The third dimension, *media valence*, is the affective aspect of an object in the news and can be represented as the “tone toward the object of a story” (p. 76).

The Implications of CSR Coverage in the News Media

Media reporting on an issue related to a corporation can be critical in shaping the public’s perception of the corporation.

Carroll and McCombs (2003) addressed how a corporation’s exposure to news coverage can significantly influence public opinion toward the corporation. A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that media attention (how many news reports cover a corporation) and media favorability (how the news media portray a corporation) have positive or negative influences on corporate reputation (Carroll 2009, 2010a; Deephouse 2000; Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Kioussis et al. 2007; Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis 2006a, b; Padelford and White 2009; Wartick 1992).

In the same vein, the news media’s discussion of CSR dimensions as they relate to a firm can influence the firm’s reputation (Carroll and McCombs 2003). Kioussis et al. (2007) found that the number of mentions of a firm’s CSR in the media correlated positively with the firm’s reputation. David et al. (2005) found that exposure to news coverage can significantly increase the public’s familiarity with CSR activities and, eventually, influence public perceptions of a corporation. It is important, therefore, for corporations to monitor what kinds of CSR dimensions are reported in relation to their business activities (Crane and Kazmi 2010).

For these reasons, news media reporting about a firm’s issues may influence the firm’s strategies (Dickson and Eckman 2008; Gan 2006). For instance, if the media are more willing to cover CSR dimensions and value what corporations do to fulfill CSR, corporations may be more likely to participate in such activities. By examining the philanthropic behavior of 40 *Fortune* 500 companies over 7 years, Gan (2006) demonstrated that corporations participated in corporate giving not only for altruistic reasons but also from strategic motives, responding to external pressures such as lawsuits and media attention. When there was more news coverage, corporations tended to donate more. Even when the media focus on negative news related to CSR, criticizing corporations, media attention to the issue still drives corporations’ voluntary initiatives to engage in CSR activities.

The Opinion Pages as a Public Sphere

Editorial and op-ed pages are a good locus for examining opinions in the public sphere (Hart 2001). Sociologists Lasswell (1948) and Wright (1959) have listed four basic functions for the mass media: surveillance, correlation, transmission of cultural heritage, and entertainment. In reporting and breaking the news, the media primarily serve the surveillance function. The opinion pages serve the correlation function, defined by Jeffres et al. (1999) as consisting of “explaining [and] interpreting the meaning of events and information” (pp. 86–87). The opinion pages are a mediated public sphere in which journalists, citizens, company representatives, and others engage in dialog and

³ We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this observation.

debate. The opinion pages are composed of three basic kinds of pieces—editorials, columns, and letters to the editor—each with its own characteristics. An *editorial* is an unsigned opinion piece that expresses and constitutes the news organization's official opinion on a matter of public or community interest. The editorial page is the one place in a newspaper, where the newspaper's leadership attempts to persuade or clarify issues to the public. *Columns* are similar to editorials, but whereas editorials are unsigned and represent the views of the news outlet, columns are signed and only represent the views of the columnist. Three types of columns about public issues exist.⁴ *Op-ed columns* usually appear opposite the editorial page in the newspaper; they are written by editorial board members speaking for themselves and often offer opinions divergent from the editorials. *News analyses* are opinions where journalists step outside of their reporting roles to offer opinions about matters appearing in news stories. *Guest contributions* are opinions written by individuals unaffiliated with the news media who offer some form of author expertise. *Letters to the editor* are a medium through which readers can speak back to the newspaper and express views in support of or diverging from the dominant editorial view (Nemeth and Sanders 2001). Letters represent the widest range of stakeholders' opinions among the audience. Diversity of opinion is one of the main criteria for publication.

Fombrun and Shanley (1990) observed that “the media ... act not only as vehicles for advertising and mirrors of reality reflecting firms' actions, but also as active agents shaping information through editorials and feature articles” (p. 240). *The New York Times'* op-ed section has stated that its objective is to act as a forum for public discussion where the public's ideas and opinions as well as those of journalists can be exchanged: “*The Times* inaugurates today a new page opposite the editorial page devoted to views and opinions. The objective... is to afford greater opportunity for exploration of issues and presentation of new insights and new ideas by writers and thinkers who have no institutional connection [with the paper]” (*The New York Times* 1970, September 21, p. 42).

Research Questions

Based on the literature, the present study asked the following research questions about the media salience of CSR.

RQ1: How has *media attention* to CSR dimensions in newspaper opinion pieces changed over time?

⁴ There are other types of columns, such as in the sports, arts, and entertainment pages, but we are concerned with opinion pages about public issues.

RQ2: How has the *media prominence* of CSR dimensions in newspaper opinion pieces changed over time?

RQ3: How has the *media valence* of CSR dimensions in newspaper opinion pieces changed over time?

RQ4: Which types of newspaper opinion pieces have most frequently discussed CSR dimensions, and how have they changed over time?

Methods

The present study performed a content analysis of editorials, op-ed columns, guest columns, news analyses, and letters to the editor from nine major U.S. newspapers. The data set for this study was newspaper opinion pieces mentioning U.S. firms from June 1980 to December 2004. We extracted these opinion pieces from the Lexis-Nexis database using the document segment “ticker.” The ticker document segment contained the stock exchange and the firms' ticker symbols, allowing for the elimination of stories about non-U.S. companies from the sample. The analysis examined U.S. firms appearing in two national U.S. newspapers (*The New York Times* and *USA Today*) and seven regional newspapers (*The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Houston Chronicle*). We chose our newspapers to allow for geographic representation across the U.S. (Einwiller et al., 2010). We did not choose the *Wall Street Journal* because we were interested in lay public opinions rather than simply in those of business elites (Carroll 2010). Our target sample was 2,500 initial articles over 25 years, using every 10th opinion piece listed chronologically by date. After that initial selection, only the newspaper opinion pieces about U.S. firms and discussing CSR-related dimensions (as defined below) were coded.

In the screening phase, the coding team tagged all firms mentioned in the opinion pieces, since there was no predetermined list of firms. As mentioned above, this study only examined U.S. publicly traded firms; we omitted firms appearing on foreign stock exchanges were from this study. Thus, the sampling unit was an opinion piece and the coding unit was a mention of a CSR dimension. As a result, 460 opinion pieces were coded that addressed one or more of the CSR dimensions regarding the firms.

Following the definition of Carroll (1979), we defined a CSR dimension as a discussion of the economic, legal, ethical, or philanthropic responsibilities of firms. Accordingly, our codebook set forth four categories, and coders indicated the presence or absence of each dimension of CSR for each opinion piece (see Table 1). Consequently, some opinion pieces contained more than one dimension of

Table 1 Dimensions of CSR

CSR dimensions	Description	Examples
Economic responsibility	Economic responsibility should exhibit content about a focal organization's book value, profit, market share, sales, profitability, and/or prospects. This category may also include content related to sales or revenue. If there is any mention of the company's standing in the market, i.e., market performance, this would be considered economic responsibility	<i>US Airways'</i> bankruptcy filing over the weekend was as well thought out as they come. The carrier, the largest east of the Mississippi, had obtained significant wage concessions from its unions, government loan guarantees, and new private financing before even landing in bankruptcy. These steps will allow <i>US Airways</i> to continue flying while in bankruptcy, and should help its chances of emerging a stronger carrier (<i>The New York Times</i> , August 13, 2002, p. 18)
Legal responsibility	Legal responsibility should exhibit content about the lawsuits or the following terms, "case," "suit," "settlements," "indictment," and "court"	This week the Justice Department began its antitrust case against <i>Visa</i> and <i>MasterCard</i> . The government argues that the <i>Visa</i> and <i>MasterCard</i> networks are too cozy with each other and use their enormous financial power to knock out potential competitors, thereby stunting innovation (<i>The New York Times</i> , June 15, 2000, p. 26) The Justice Department will now decide if <i>Ticketmaster's</i> manipulation of long-term contracts has served to monopolize the market. If so, the law provides plenty of remedies—which would be music to the ears of Pearl Jam's idolatrous fans (<i>The New York Times</i> , July 8, 1994, p. 26)
Ethical responsibility	Ethical responsibility refers to the various moral or ethical problems that can arise in a business setting; and any special duties or obligations that apply to persons who are engaged in commerce. It makes specific judgments about what is right or wrong, which is to say, it makes claims about what ought to be done or what ought not to be done This category also includes descriptions of dishonesty, corruption, or cover-ups. This may include discussions of antitrust violations, fraud, damage to the environment in violation of environmental legislation, exploitation of labor in violation of labor laws, and failure to maintain a fiduciary responsibility toward shareholders including withholding information from its customers and investors	Only a person of unblemished virtue can get a job at <i>Wal-Mart</i> —a low-level job, that is, sorting stock, unloading trucks or operating a cash register. A drug test eliminates the chemical miscreants; a detailed "personality test" probes the job applicant's horror of theft and willingness to turn in an erring co-worker.... Apparently the one rule that need not be slavishly adhered to at <i>Wal-Mart</i> is the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, which requires that employees be paid time and a half if they work more than 40 h in a week. Present and former <i>Wal-Mart</i> employees in 28 states are suing the company for failure to pay overtime (<i>The New York Times</i> , June 30, 2002, p. 15)
Philanthropic responsibility	Philanthropic responsibility includes citizenship, philanthropy, social performance, and environmental performance. Citizenship refers to volunteering in social and community activities. Philanthropy includes "the donation or granting of money to various worthy charitable causes." Philanthropy exists when the company is involved in educational, artistic, musical, religious, and humanitarian causes. Social performance exhibits content about the focal organization with reference to certain social concerns, such as the environment, human rights, financial integrity, and other salience ethical issues. Social performance refers to the "recognition and acceptance of the consequences of each action and decision one undertakes," exhibiting a "caring attitude toward self and others," "recognition of basic human rights of self and others." Environmental performance should exhibit content about the focal organization with reference to energy, water, materials, emissions, and waste	As chairman of the <i>Ford Motor Company</i> , William Clay Ford Jr. said all the right things about the environment. As its new chief executive officer, he'll have the power to put his words into action. His challenge is to prove that an enlightened executive can turn <i>Ford</i> into a responsible corporate citizen (<i>The New York Times</i> , November 2, 2001, p. 25)

CSR and some contained more than one company. For example, when an opinion piece mentioned one firm in relation to its economic responsibilities and also mentioned another firm in relation to its philanthropic work, the coder included both companies and both dimensions of CSR.

The research questions contained four major variables: *media attention*, *media prominence*, *media valence*, and

opinion type. As Kiousis (2004) pointed out, *media attention*, *media prominence*, and *media valence* are three dimensions of media salience. We adapted and extended Kiousis' definition of these concepts to examine media salience through a comparative longitudinal analysis. For our purposes, we defined *media attention* as the media exposure of a CSR dimension in 1 year. We measured

media attention at two levels: at the level of individual CSR dimensions, we measured it as the total number of mentions per dimension per year, and at the aggregate level, we measured it as the total number of opinion pieces per year in which at least one of the four dimensions of CSR appeared.

We defined *media prominence* as the relative importance of the four dimensions of CSR. We measured it as the proportion of the number of articles which included mentions of a dimension of CSR among the total mentions of all four dimensions per year. Thus, higher levels of media attention for a CSR dimension in 1 year relative to the other three produced higher media prominence for that dimension.

We defined *media valence* as the tone linked to each mention of CSR. We evaluated *tone* as being positive,

negative, neutral, or mixed (see Table 2). *Positive* tone referred to an attribute’s mention that was favorable toward a firm linked to a CSR dimension. *Negative* tone referred to an attribute’s mention that was unfavorable toward a firm linked to a CSR dimension. *Neutral* tone referred to an attribute’s mention in relation to a firm linked to a CSR dimension that lacked either positive or negative statements. *Mixed* tone referred to an attribute’s mention in relation to a firm linked to a CSR dimension that had both positive and negative statements.

Opinion type referred the type of opinion piece: *editorial*, *op-ed column*, *letter*, *guest contributor*, and *news analyst*. Document segments supplied by Lexis-Nexis determined the type of opinion pieces.

To ensure intercoder reliability, we randomly selected 10% of the opinion pieces for training purposes. Training

Table 2 Definitions of media valence

Tone	Description	Examples
Positive	The category “Positive” refers to content that is positive toward the company. Media contents to be coded positive generally refer to the company with positive emotional appeal, as an object of admiration and respect, or particularly trustworthy	<i>McDonald’s Corp.</i> , which plans to spend \$400 million this year to build or remodel about 1,400 restaurants, says that fully \$100 million of that sum will be used to buy recycled products. McDonald’s promises that this big jump in its support for recycling ... will continue indefinitely. Given a big enough market, recycled products are often cheaper than virgin materials; in time, then, McDonald’s profits ought to be boosted. That consideration in no way detracts from the social value of what the fast-food chain is doing. <i>Los Angeles Times</i> , April 19, 1990, p. B6
Neutral	The category “Negative” refers to an attribute mentioned in relation to the company that has the absence of both positive and negative contents in the story	The <i>Dell</i> Computer Corporation said yesterday that it was lowering the base price of 14 personal computers and expanding services like the pre-installation of software and telephone assistance (<i>The New York Times</i> , February 10, 1993, p. 5)
Mixed	The category “Mixed” refers to an attribute mentioned in relation to the company that has both positive and negative contents in the story	At <i>Enron.com</i> , the company’s website, one learns that as a “global corporate citizen” <i>Enron</i> intends to conduct itself in accord with four capital-V Values: respect, integrity, communication, and excellence. This is fairly standard stuff, but a more detailed reading may provide some insight into <i>Enron’s</i> corporate psyche.... Take respect: “We treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves.” Fair enough. However, <i>Enron</i> elaborates: “We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment. Ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance don’t belong here.” Oh my. Who brought up ruthlessness, callousness, and arrogance? As a corporate communications editor, I’ve read hundreds of companies’ V&V statements, and nowhere have I seen a single reference to ruthlessness, callousness, or arrogance—let alone all three (<i>The New York Times</i> , January 19, 2002, p. 19)
Negative	The category “Negative” refers to content that is unfavorable toward the company. This includes comments where material about the company generates negative emotional appeal, or is portrayed as unworthy of admiration, respect, or trust. This may include a response where the company is made to sound not as well off as a contrasting company via statement of preference	I find it particularly troubling that <i>Enron</i> paid no corporate income taxes in four of the last 5 years (front page, Jan. 17). Here is a company that claimed to be a leading corporate citizen and that could not possibly have done more to pervert our democratic, free-market system. My sincere hope is that the pernicious system of corporate influence in Washington and in the state capitals that permitted this debacle to occur will continue to be exposed so that it can be dismantled (<i>The New York Times</i> , January 23, 2002, p. 18)

continued until the six coders achieved a 90% level of agreement.

Results

RQ1 asked about the trend of media attention to CSR dimensions over time. To answer this question, we generated the volume of opinion pieces for each year ($N = 460$), and performed a linear regression. Overall, the total number of opinion pieces increased significantly over time, $F(1, 458) = 518.86, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.53$. The regression analysis revealed a positive relationship between the year and the number of opinion pieces ($B = 1.99, p < 0.001$). Specifically, the numbers of legal and philanthropic issues spiked in the late 1990s, while economic and ethical issues peaked in the early 2000s (see Tables 3 and 4, Fig. 2).

RQ2 asked about the prominence of each dimension of CSR over time. *Prominence* means the relative emphasis of one dimension over the others at a given time period, in contrast to RQ1, which focused on the absolute number of opinion pieces mentioning a particular dimension. To answer the second research question, we performed two kinds of data analyses.

First, we conducted a multiple regression to examine changes in the relative importance of each dimension over time. We calculated the proportion by dividing the number of instances of a CSR-related dimension by the total number of all four CSR dimensions in each year. On average, throughout the 25 years examined, the most prominent dimension was the philanthropic dimension

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of opinion pieces per dimension ($N = 460$)

Dimensions	<i>n</i>	%
Economic	112	24.35
Legal	114	24.78
Ethical	95	20.65
Philanthropic	139	30.22

Table 4 Regression results for the trend of the number of opinion pieces over time

Variables	Economic responsibility		Legal responsibility		Ethical responsibility		Philanthropic responsibility	
	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>
Year	0.68***	0.04	0.78***	0.05	0.96***	0.07	0.35***	0.03
R^2	0.44		0.36		0.30		0.23	
$F(1, 458)$	354.61***		254.25***		198.57***		138.39***	

Note: The independent variable is the year, and the dependent variable is the total number of opinion pieces per year for each dimension. “*B*” denotes an unstandardized regression coefficient and “SE *B*” denotes standard error for the regression coefficient

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

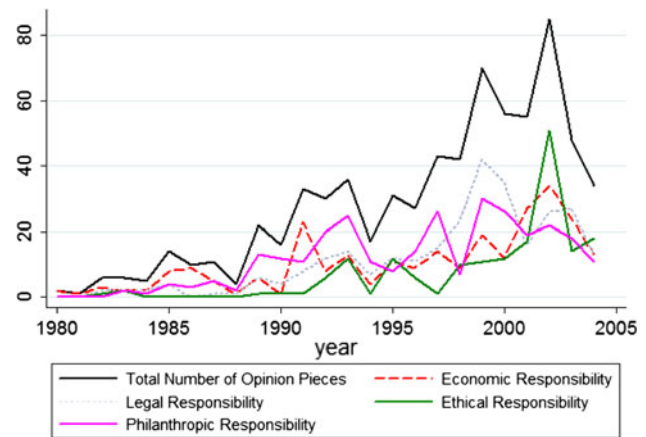


Fig. 2 The trends of media attention to CSR issues from 1980 to 2004

($M = 0.30, SD = 0.14$), and the least emphasized dimension was the ethical dimension ($M = 0.16, SD = 0.12$).

Because of the curvilinear nature of the data distribution (see Fig. 3), we tested the equation through a hierarchical polynomial regression procedure. In the first step, we tested the linear regression ($y = b_0 + b_1x$), and in the second step, we added the quadratic term, x^2 . For comparison, we conducted the F tests of the increase in R^2 . The results indicated significant improvements in the fit of the model, demonstrating that nonlinear relationships better described the data. The shapes can be described by the following quadratic equation:

$$y = b_0 + b_1x + b_2x^2 \quad (1980 \leq x \leq 2004)$$

where $b_2 > 0$ in U shape and $b_2 < 0$ in inverted U shape.

In the present study, the quadratic terms were significant for all four dimensions (see Table 5). Specifically, among the four dimensions, the proportion of the economic dimension continuously decreased from 1980 to 1996 and then began to increase after 1996. The fitted line was $y = 9015.14 - 9.03x + 0.002x^2$, which had the lowest value at the point of 1995.91 (around November 1995). In 1980, the estimated proportion of mentions of the economic dimension among all four dimensions was 67%, whereas in 1996 it was 10%. Even though the proportion

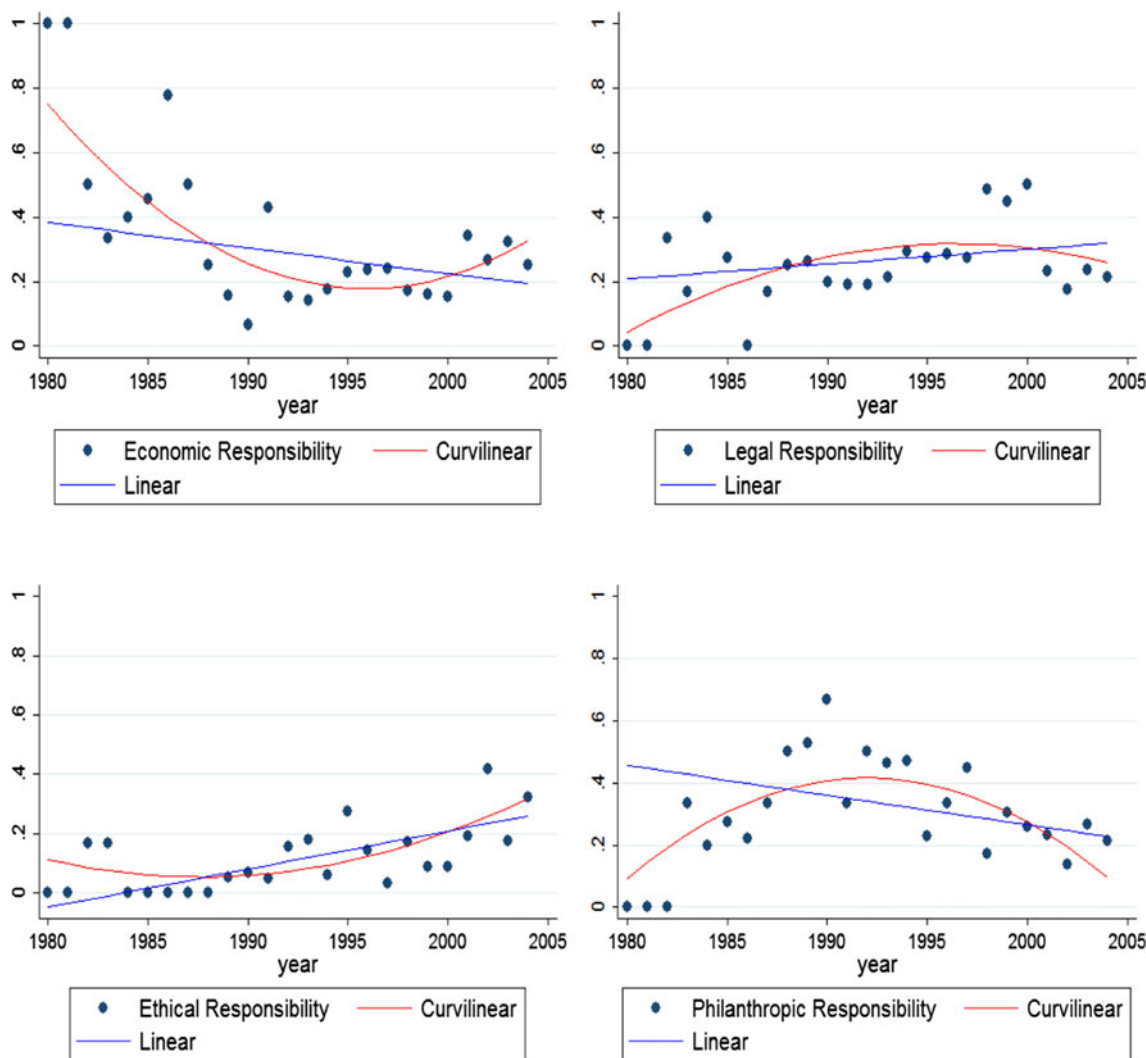


Fig. 3 The trends of media prominence of four dimensions

Table 5 Multiple regression of nonlinear effects of time on the proportions of opinion pieces within the same time period (N = 460)

Variables	Economic responsibility		Legal responsibility		Ethical responsibility		Philanthropic responsibility	
	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Year	-9.03***	0.52	4.07***	0.60	-3.95***	0.50	8.92***	0.53
Year ²	0.00***	0.00	-0.00***	0.00	0.00***	0.00	-0.00***	0.00
R ²	0.47		0.48		0.39		0.32	
F (1, 458)	397.02***		427.67***		291.59***		217.69***	

Note: “B” denotes an unstandardized regression coefficient and “SE B” denotes standard error for the regression coefficient
 *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

increased from 1996 to 2004, the estimated proportion in 2004 was only 25%.

The proportion of the legal dimension formed an inverted U-shaped curve. It rose continuously from 10% in 1980 to 38% in 1996, then gradually decreased to 32% in 2004. The fitted line was $y = -4059.45 + 4.07x$

$- 0.001x^2$, which peaked at a value of 1996.42 (around June 1996).

The proportion of the ethical dimension formed a U-shaped curve. It slightly decreased from 12% in 1980 to 6% in 1988 and then rose continuously up to 32% in 2004. The fitted line was $y = 3929.55 - 3.95x + 0.001x^2$, which

had the lowest value at 1987.67 (around September 1987). This dimension occupied the lowest proportion until the early 2000s. It began to be emphasized equally with the other dimensions in the early 2000s and became the second most prominent dimension in 2004.

The proportion of the philanthropic dimension formed an inverted U-shaped curve, and the pattern was similar to that of the legal dimension. It gradually rose from 11% in 1980 to become the most prominent dimension at 43% in 1992. The fitted line was $y = -8884.23 + 8.92x - 0.002x^2$, which peaks at a value of 1992.02 (around January 1992). After that, however, it continuously decreased, and stood again at 11% by 2004.

As a second kind of data analysis to answer RQ2, we conducted follow-up analyses using binary logistic regression to validate the results of multiple regression. The multiple regression was based on 25 distinct values, which represented the proportions of each dimension over 25 years. The binary logistic regression used 460 distinct values, which corresponded to each unique opinion piece, and was based on the proportion of opinion pieces within each individual dimension. In other words, it compared whether the proportion of opinion pieces which mentioned one of the dimensions was constant over time; therefore, the results supplement each other. The dependent variable in this analysis was the presence or absence of the mention of each dimension of CSR. As in the multiple regression analysis, the square term was included to represent the nonlinear relationships between the year and the mention of each dimension. As the purpose of the follow-up analysis was to verify the pattern tested in the multiple regression, we only reported the model fit for each dimension and excluded more in-depth information, such as the odds ratio and its interpretation.

The results showed that the distribution of the proportion of media attention in each dimension was consistent with the distribution of media prominence in the multiple regression analysis (see Fig. 4). All four models were significant: $\chi^2(2) = 18.33$, $p < 0.001$ for the economic dimension, $\chi^2(2) = 9.61$, $p < 0.001$ for the legal dimension, $\chi^2(2) = 37.51$, $p < 0.001$ for the ethical dimension, and $\chi^2(2) = 21.6$, $p < 0.001$ for the philanthropic dimension (see Table 6).

The two types of distributions, one from the multiple regression analysis and the other from the binary logistic regression analysis, can be congruent only when the overall pattern of media attention to all four dimensions is consistent. Applying this logic to the present study, the results indicate that the media attention to all four dimensions of CSR continuously increased from 1980 to around 2000 and decreased from then until 2004. Within the overall rise in media and public attention to CSR issues, there were variations in the prominence of each dimension at different

time periods. For instance, in the early 1980s, the economic dimension of CSR was the most emphasized. In the mid-1990s, the legal dimension and the philanthropic dimension became prominent, while emphasis on the economic dimension weakened. Meanwhile, even though the ethical dimension was not as actively discussed as other dimensions, it continuously increased over time. In the early 2000s, the discussions of the four dimensions of CSR reached a balance. By 2004, the economic dimension and the ethical dimension drew more discussion than the other dimensions.

RQ3 asked about the media valence toward CSR dimensions in opinion pieces. In the coding protocol, the tone was linked to each mention of the dimensions. Thus, if an opinion piece contained more than one dimension, and if the mentions of the dimensions had same tone, the same tone could appear more than once in an individual opinion piece. We measured the degree of valence as a total count of the tones mentioned. Therefore, in examining the tone of opinion pieces over time, we applied Poisson regression; Poisson regression is appropriate when dependent variables are count data, because count data violate the assumption of a normal distribution and consist of non-negative integer values (Allison 1999).

The results showed the total number of mentions of CSR dimensions was 704 in 460 opinion pieces. Negative mentions were the most common ($n = 416$). Over 25 years, the average number of negative mentions was 27.41 (SD = 17.32), peaking in 2002 ($n = 64$). The average number of positive mentions per year was 7.75 (SD = 3.53), peaking in 1999 ($n = 14$). The average number of neutral mentions was 1.98 (SD = 2.25), peaking both in 2000 ($n = 6$) and 2004 ($n = 6$). The average number of mixed mentions was 7.35 (SD = 4.37), peaking in 1997 ($n = 14$). The graph showed that the negative mentions sharply increased while other tones increased slowly (see Fig. 5).

In testing the trend statistically, Poisson regression analysis showed that all four tones significantly increased over time (see Table 7). Among them, the negative tone increased most ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$), followed by the mixed tone ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.001$), the neutral tone ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), and the positive tone ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$).

For more in-depth analysis, we further explored the issues linked to negative mentions, employing the same data analysis method used for RQ1. The curvilinear distribution of negative mentions over time was statistically significant for all four dimensions of CSR, and the overall patterns were similar with the results in RQ1 (see Figs. 6, 7).

Specifically, the proportion of the economic dimension among the four dimensions of CSR continuously decreased

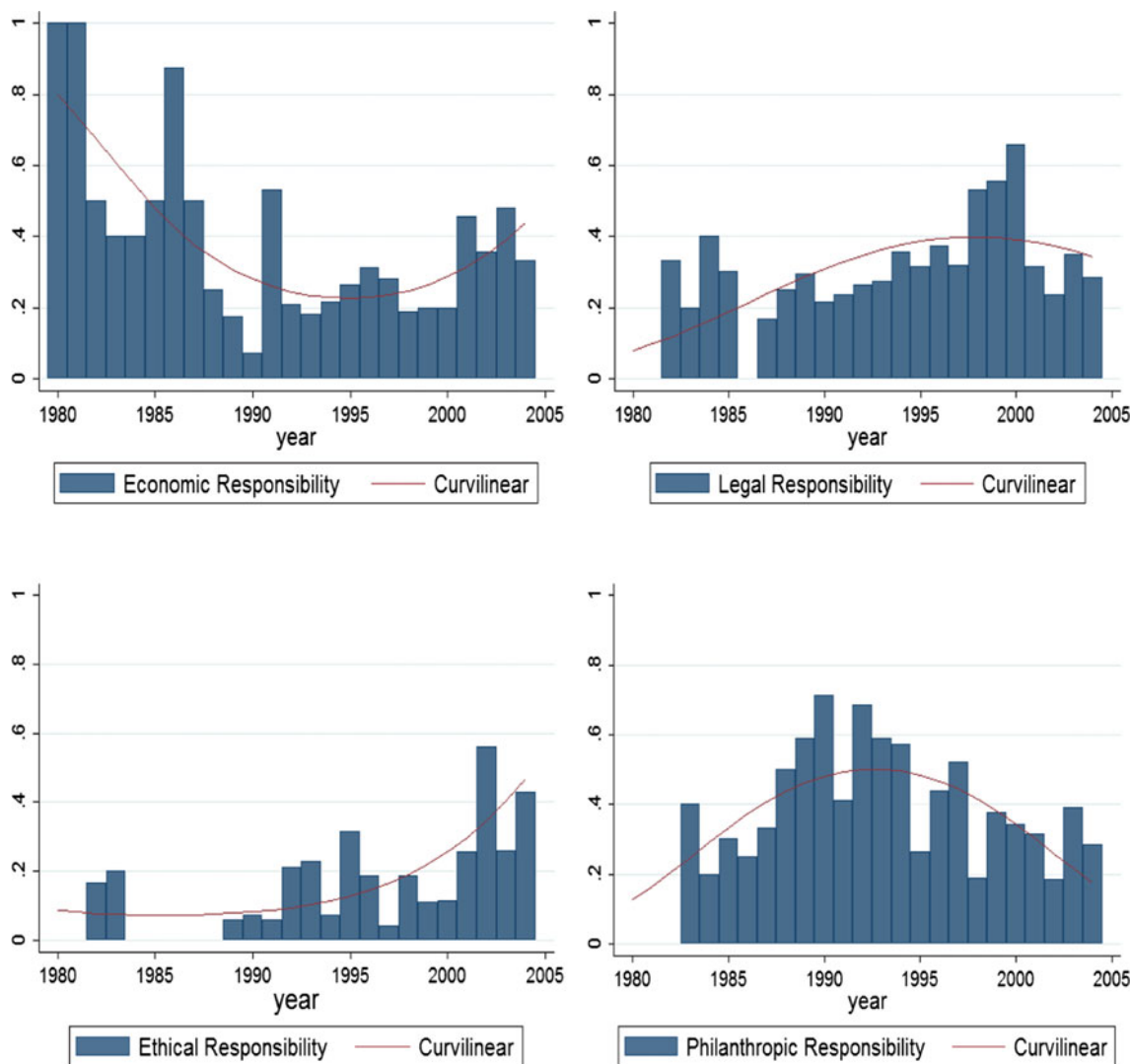


Fig. 4 The proportion of opinion pieces within a dimension for 25 years

from 1980 to 1996 and then increased until 2004. The fitted line was $y = 8611.83 - 8.63x + 0.002x^2$, which had the lowest proportion, 30%, at the value of 1996.47 (around June 1996). The proportion of the legal dimension among the four dimensions formed an inverted U-shaped curve. No negative tone appeared in 1980 and 1981, but overall the proportion of negative tone continuously rose from 1983 to 1996 and then decreased until 2004. The fitted line was $y = -7895.80 + 7.91x - 0.001x^2$, which peaked at 41% at a value of 1995.63 (around August 1995). The proportion of the ethical dimension among the four dimensions formed a U-shaped curve. It slightly decreased from 1980 to 1987 but continuously rose to 2004. The fitted line was $y = 4541.62 - 4.57x + 0.001x^2$, which had the lowest proportion, 3%, at the value of 1986.74 (around September 1986). The proportion of the philanthropic dimension formed an inverted U-shaped curve. It gradually rose from 1980 to 1989 and then decreased until 2004. The

fitted line was $y = -5256.64 + 5.29x - 0.001x^2$, which peaked at 20% at a value of 1989.29 (around April 1989).

RQ4 asked about the types of opinion pieces that discussed CSR issues. Overall, CSR issues were most frequently discussed in newspaper editorials (40.65%, $n = 187$), which set the agenda for public discussion (McCombs 2004) (see Fig. 8). This type was followed by letters to the editor (32.83%, $n = 151$). Discussions of CSR issues in other types of opinion pieces also increased over time, but they did not cover the issues as frequently as did editorials and letters to the editor. CSR dimensions began to be actively discussed from the late 1980s onward.

Discussion

The present study examined how the news media have discussed CSR dimensions over the past 25 years. Overall,

Table 6 Logistic regression of nonlinear effects of time on the proportions of opinion pieces within a dimension along four dimensions ($N = 460$)

Variables	Economic responsibility		Legal responsibility		Ethical responsibility		Philanthropic responsibility	
	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE	Odds ratio	SE
Year	0.69*** (-4.15)	0.06	1.27*** (2.30)	0.13	0.91 (-0.69)	0.12	1.39*** (3.46)	0.13
Year ²	1.01*** (4.03)	0.00	0.99*** (-1.97)	0.00	1.01 (1.78)	0.00	0.99*** (0.99)	0.00
$\chi^2(2)$	18.33***		9.61***		37.51***		21.6***	

Note: “SE” denotes standard error. The value in the parentheses indicates Wald z -statistics. $\chi^2(df)$. Although the model fit for the ethical responsibility dimension was significant, coefficients for the year and the square term were not significant. In a simple logistic regression, however, odds ratio for the independent variable, year, was 1.15, for which the p value for the Wald statistic was significant ($z = 5.16$, $p < 0.001$)

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

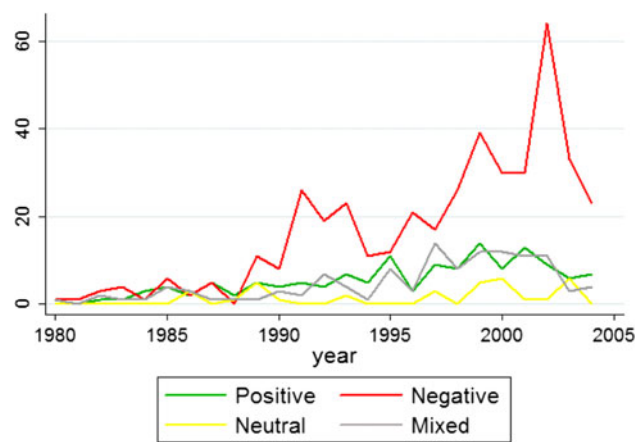


Fig. 5 The trends of media valence to CSR issues from 1980 to 2004

the number of opinion pieces about CSR issues has consistently risen.

CSR is an evolving and multidimensional concept, but most previous studies have focused only on one or two dimensions. By examining all of the CSR issues at one time, we see that there was very little attention to any of the CSR issues in the early 1980s, but that there was considerable growth for all four dimensions of CSR over the next 25 years.

By focusing on all four dimensions of CSR, we can see how attention to these dimensions has changed over time. Each of the four CSR dimensions had its moment of media prominence when it was more important than the other dimensions: the economic dimension in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the philanthropic in the late 1980s and early 1990s and then again in the mid-to-late 1990s, then legal responsibility in the late 1990s, followed by ethical responsibility in the early 2000s.

The CSR issue with the most coverage fluctuated between economic responsibility and philanthropic responsibility between 1980 and 1995, when ethical responsibility rose and tied with legal responsibility in 1995. Legal responsibility steadily grew over the 25 years, but was the most salient theme in the late 1990s when ethical responsibility was the least salient theme. Ethical responsibility was the most salient theme in the early 2000s.

We have shown how each of the four dimensions has its own lifecycle, rising and falling over time, competing with the other issues. As Fig. 4 illustrates, the proportion of opinion pieces with each dimension had different curvilinear slopes.

We have shown how media attention, prominence, and valence of CSR discussion in the newspaper opinions varied over time. In the 1980s, for instance, the most frequently discussed issues were those of economic responsibility. The

Table 7 Poisson regression of tones on mentioning CSR issues over time ($N = 460$)

Variables	Positive		Negative		Neutral		Mixed	
	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B	B	SE B
Year	0.06***	0.003	0.11***	0.002	0.06***	0.007	0.08***	0.004
$\chi^2(1)$	334.72***		3187.87***		91.95**		494.18***	

Note: “ B ” denotes an unstandardized regression coefficient and “SE B ” denotes standard error for the regression coefficient. The dependent variable was the number of instances mentioning each tone per opinion piece

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

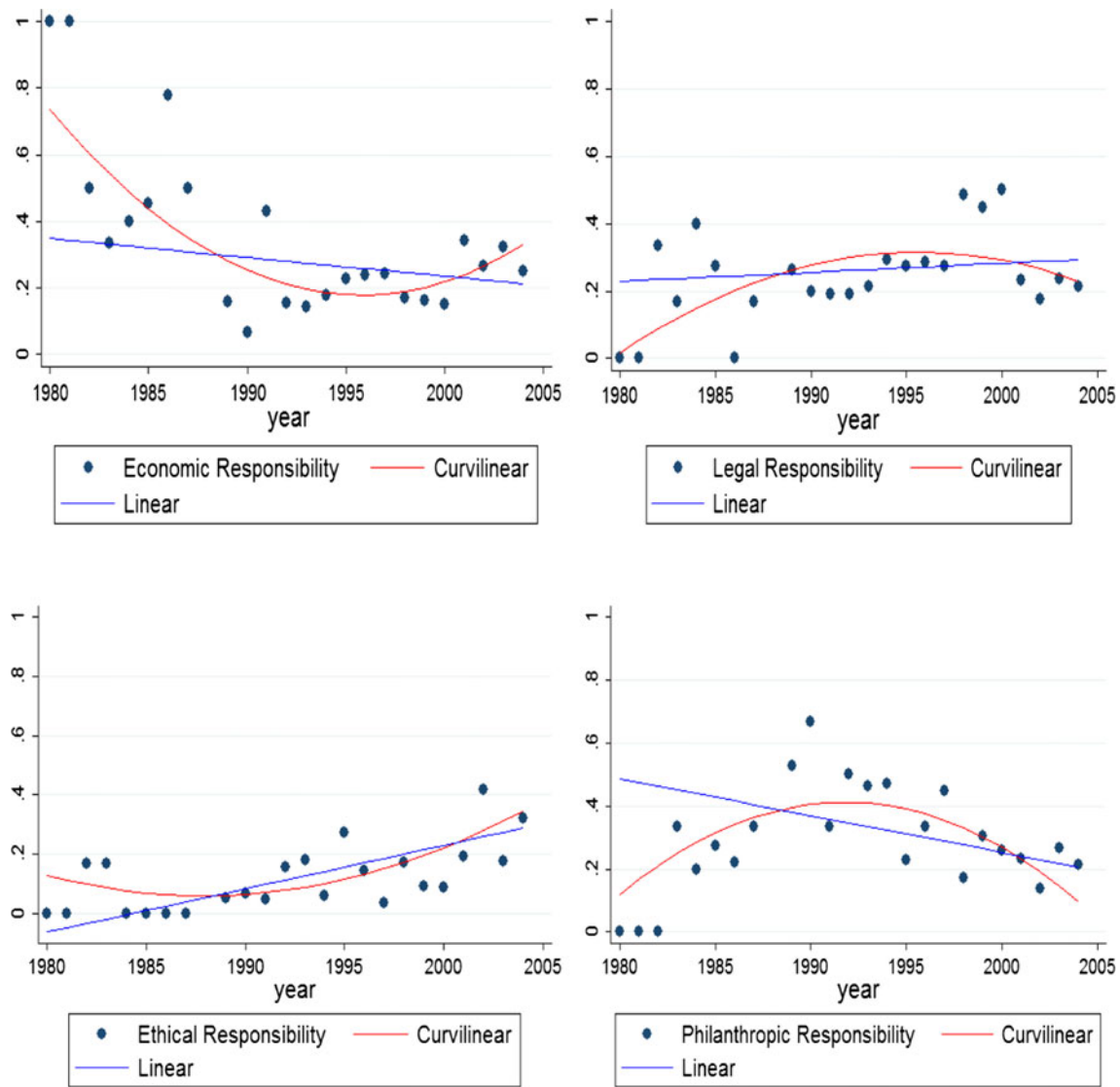


Fig. 6 The trends of media prominence of four dimensions in negative opinion pieces

proportion of economic responsibility issues decreased in the 1990s, but these issues were still discussed as much as other issues. In the meantime, issues of corporate legal responsibility and philanthropic responsibility were intensively discussed during the period of 1995–1999 but declined slightly until 2004. Most recently, there has been increased discussion of ethical issues; this has increased since 1990 and peaked during the period from 2000 to 2004. Overall, in earlier years, one particular dimension was discussed more than other dimensions. By 2004, however, the proportion of each dimension had become similar.

The results from the media valence of the CSR dimensions showed that the negative tone was predominant over the other tones. Specifically, the criticism of ethical responsibility had continuously increased over time, and its proportion among the four dimensions was at its highest

level in the last year examined, 2004. Meanwhile, the proportion of negative opinion pieces dealing with the legal and philanthropic dimensions of CSR decreased after 1995. Corporate economic responsibility was greatly emphasized in 1980s, but the prominence of that issue in negative opinion pieces decreased over time.

Finally, the CSR agenda may be molded by the news media or mirror public attention (Scheufele et al. 2011). Editorial pieces, representing the newspapers’ official opinions on CSR, occupied the largest proportion of the opinion pieces. Nevertheless, the increase in letters to the editor, which reflect the public agenda, showed that the public also had a growing interest in CSR issues over time.

The results of this longitudinal study of CSR-related opinion pieces have several implications. First, the growing media attention to CSR issues shows that CSR has become

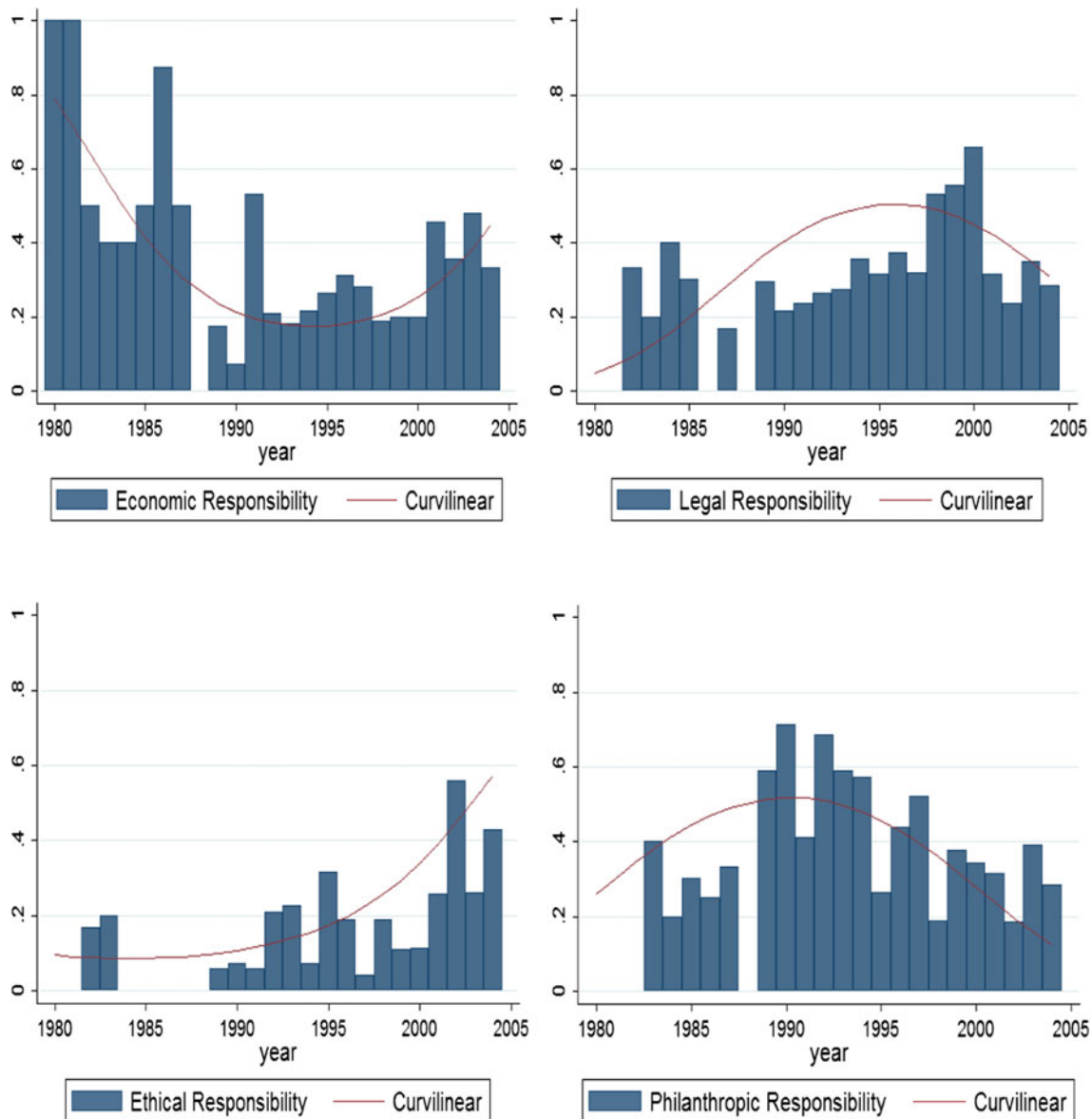


Fig. 7 The proportion of negative opinion pieces within a dimension for 25 years

more newsworthy over time, and thus suggests that corporations' CSR efforts are not pointless, but rather are a valuable commitment. Moreover, the balanced proportion of the four dimensions in opinion pieces in the 2000s indicates that it is not only ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, which are the dimensions of CSR most corporations are focused on now, that need to be fulfilled, but also the more fundamental ones, such as economic and legal responsibilities. As Cho and Hong (2008) demonstrated, without fulfilling these fundamental responsibilities, dedication to a higher level of responsibility cannot enhance corporate status in society or elevate corporate reputation.

Second, the variation of the media prominence of each dimension over time implies changing interests in and expectations about these issues on the part of the media and of the public in general. Following the premise that the news media reflect the social values and norms of a given time period, the shift in salience among CSR dimensions over time may reflect the public's changing expectations regarding CSR. During the 1980s, when the regulation of corporations was relatively strong, it makes sense that legal responsibility was of the highest concern. Similarly, the later increase in the proportion of ethical responsibility issues is understandable as a response to the Enron scandal of 2002. Such shifts suggest that corporations need to keep

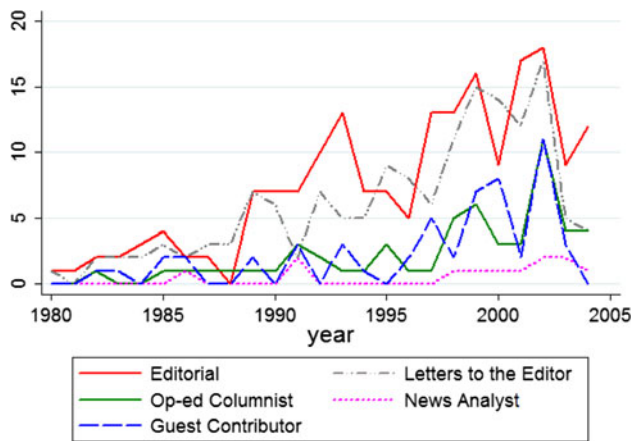


Fig. 8 The trends of media attention to CSR issues by type of opinion

monitoring the changing social values and the public's expectations of corporations.

Third, the prevalence of negative opinion pieces regarding the CSR dimensions suggests that managers need to remain aware of what issues related to corporations the news media are most concerned about and how the media assess such issues. Moreover, corporations need to keep informing the media of their CSR activities and to respond promptly once they receive media inquiries. Furthermore, public relations practitioners also need to be open to communicating with the general public regarding what their corporations do to fulfill CSR and to keep up with the public's changing expectations about CSR.

Unlike most previous studies of CSR, the present study adopted a definition of CSR that cuts across all of the relevant dimensions. This study is also one of the most extensive in the time period it examined, surveying trends over a period of 25 years. Nevertheless, the study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, even though we constructed our coding schemes based on an extensive literature review and pretests, other CSR-related dimensions could exist that were not covered by Carroll's definition and this study's coding scheme. Moreover, considering that CSR is an evolving concept, the coding scheme may need to be revised on an ongoing basis. Second, the present study is descriptive, but future studies can explore the factors which result in different degrees of media attention, prominence, and valence. Third, this study has focused on examining the overall pattern of opinion pieces, but more specific studies can examine, for instance, what kinds of topics or issues are covered in such opinion pieces, how much each piece discusses those issues, and how closely the issues are related to particular firms. The results could also be given a more in-depth interpretation, one linked to social, political,

or cultural contexts in order to explore why certain issues were salient during the time period studied. Finally, the current study limited the scope of the firms and the news media examined to the U.S. Previous studies (Chapple and Moon 2005; Maignan and Ralston 2002; Matten and Moon 2008) have shown that the CSR communications in Europe and Asia can differ from those in the U.S. Also, Carroll (2011b) has described how U.S. news coverage of CSR differs from coverage in other parts of the world. Future CSR media research should broaden the scope to other countries and other media, such as stakeholder and social media.

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