

# The Construction of Corporate Social Responsibility in Network Societies: A Communication View

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**Abstract** The paper introduces the *communication view* on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which regards CSR as communicatively constructed in dynamic interaction processes in today's networked societies. Building on the idea that *communication constitutes organizations* we discuss the potentially indeterminate, disintegrative, and conflictual character of CSR. We hereby challenge established mainstream views on CSR such as the instrumental view, which regards CSR as an organizational instrument to reach organizational aims such as improved reputation and financial performance, and the political-normative view on CSR, which highlights the societal conditions and role of corporations in creating norms. We argue that both the established views, by not sufficiently acknowledging communication dynamics in networked societies, remain biased in three ways: control-biased, consistency-biased, and consensus-biased. We discuss implications of these biases and propose a future research agenda for the communication view on CSR.

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility · Communication · CCO · Network society · Legitimacy

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## Introduction

CSR is by corporations, policy makers, and societal actors often regarded as one of the best ways for businesses to address social problems and maintain legitimacy (Gond et al. 2011; Matten and Moon 2008; Moon and Vogel 2008). It is often discussed as a corporate or state instrument to reach organizational aims by simultaneously supporting societal aims (Jones 1995), such as higher financial performance and social prosperity (Porter and Kramer 2006), reputation and social engagement (Mutch and Aitken 2009), employee identification and social change (Turban and Greening 1997), and establishing corporate influence while overcoming poverty, unemployment, and low levels of education (Crane et al. 2008).

While corporations react through CSR to complex societal problems such as inequality, environmental damage, or poverty across a variety of industries and cultures (Scherer and Palazzo 2011), fulfilling stakeholder expectations and gaining legitimacy is, however, an increasingly complex process. It requires a multi-faceted understanding of many concerns, voices, and conceptions of truth, and an ability to engage across independent and conflicting interpretations of the intricate issues related to corporate behavior. New communication technologies such as social media have further accentuated the dynamics of communication and the complexity for maintaining legitimacy. Interactive communication occurs at an unprecedented speed and geographical spread enabling publics to globally express their expectations toward corporations and “crowding up” large audiences within a few hours in a critical conversation about corporate legitimacy. Institutionalization of CSR is no guarantee against deviating and conflicting expectations and interpretations of the corporate efforts. On the contrary, companies with CSR policies and

programs are not seldom confronted with mistrust or accusations of “greenwashing” or of using fuzzy rhetoric that decouples from real societal change (Castelló and Lozano 2011; Göbbels 2002). Accordingly, this communicatively networked society challenges and changes the configuration of business responsibility.

We argue that the current mainstream views of CSR, instrumental views, but also the political-normative views of CSR, do not sufficiently acknowledge the role of these communicative dynamics for the constitution of CSR and legitimacy. Rather we find that they reduce communication to corporate goal-driven self-presentations (instrumental view) or societal goal-driven consensus making (political-normative view). Being focused on the functional implications of CSR for organizations and society, they are mainly interested in questions of control, consistency, and consensus, but they pay only little attention to the dynamics of communication and their “unloved” implications—its indeterminate, desintegrative, and conflictive character. So far, also recent research on communication in the context of CSR (e.g., edited volumes: Morsing and Beckmann 2006; May et al. 2007; Ihlen et al. 2011; Raupp et al. 2011; in special issues, e.g., Elving et al. forthcoming; and at conferences, e.g., Amsterdam 2011, Copenhagen 2011 and Århus 2013) do not yet sufficiently acknowledge these dynamics better. Such inquiry would require what Christensen and Cheney (2011) suggest: seeing CSR as communication and discussing *what* communication *does* to it. Communication is in the CSR discourse, in line with the instrumental view, often conceptualized as public relations, marketing communication, or reputation management, or in line with the political-normative view ideally understood as consensus-oriented dialogue that creates a shared understanding of CSR.

In this paper, we introduce a third view on CSR based on communication theories which we conceptualize as *the communication view on CSR*. This view sheds new light on the complex communication dynamics underlying the organization and configuration of CSR. Building on the idea that *communication constitutes organizations* (CCO) and morale in dynamic and complex processes (see for e.g., Schultz 2011), we define CSR as communication and as a forum for debates over social norms and expectations attached to corporate responsibilities (Guthey and Morsing, forthcoming). We discuss, how especially the so far neglected “unloved side” of communication—the indeterminacy of meaning, the disintegrative and conflictive moments of differing voices—limits a functionalist constitution of CSR as envisioned in instrumental and political-normative perspectives on the one hand, and how it, on the other hand, also enables this constitution of CSR and the legitimation of corporate social activities. We discuss the role of media and especially the role of new media such

as Facebook and blogs, and how the dynamics of social media are influenced by the reduced gatekeeping authority of traditional media in today’s globally networked societies (Bennett 2003; Castells 2000).

Very recently, quite a few studies have started to take a constitutive perspective on CSR and communication (Christensen et al. 2008; Christensen et al. 2013; Schultz and Wehmeier 2010; Schultz 2011, 2013; Haack et al. 2012; Koschmann et al. 2012; Schoeneborn and Trittin 2013) or reflected on the communicative dynamics in the social media-based interplay of organizations, publics, and news media (see May et al. 2007). Nevertheless, there is a range of socio-constructivist investigations of CSR, which serve as a fruitful basis for our communication view. These investigations focus for example on symbolic interactions (e.g., Morsing and Schultz 2006; Nijhof and Jeurissen 2006; Caruana and Crane 2008), sensemaking (Basu and Palazzo 2008; Cramer et al. 2004, 2006), or interpretation processes (Gond and Matten 2007) around CSR, and engage in reflections on the multilevel dynamics of communication and media in the construction of corporate roles and identities and the legitimation of corporations (Chouliarakis and Morsing 2010; Nijhof and Jeurissen 2006).

In our proposal to develop a communication view on CSR, we first discuss the two main views on CSR—the instrumental and the political-normative view. Second, we introduce a general framework for understanding communication processes in networked societies. Third, we reflect on the implications of the communication view on CSR and discuss the limitations of the two other views. We do so by suggesting how they represent three biases in understanding CSR, and we elaborate on how the communication view may address these limitations. We conclude with suggesting new paths for future research.

## Instrumental and Political-Normative Views on CSR

### The Instrumental View on Corporate Social Responsibilities

The instrumental view on CSR is often built on three premises: (1) businesses are conceived as a “nexus of contracts” (Jensen and Meckling 1976) in a system of principal-agent relations in which, unlike shareholders, stakeholders “have protection or seek remedies through contracts and the legal system” (Sundaram and Inkpen 2004, p. 353), (2) corporations have to maximize their profits and managers have fiduciary responsibilities to the shareholders (Sundaram and Inkpen 2004), and (3) there is a separation between the private and the public spheres, where the state has to prevent corporate externalities

(Sundaram and Inkpen 2004). The vast amount of case studies and functionalist research in this perspective aim at proving the “business case for CSR”, which means, a positive relationship between corporate social performance and corporate financial performance (indicated by Gond and Matten 2007; critically see Margolis and Walsh 2003; Vogel 2005). In this view, CSR becomes an instrument and strategic tool for value creation (Porter and Kramer 2006; Porter and Kramer 2011) that increases the financial performance of corporations (e.g., Orlitzky et al. 2003; see also Waddock and Graves 1997) by improving its reputation (e.g., Carroll 1979; Hooghiemstra 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2004; Orlitzky et al. 2003), by influencing the loyalty and motivation of employees (Turban and Greening 1997), or by improving brand awareness and credibility toward consumers (Bronn and Vrioni 2001; Kotler and Lee 2005) and thus purchases (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Influenced by stakeholder theories (Freeman 1984; Freeman et al. 2010) it takes not only shareholders, but also other actors like pressure groups or NGOs into account, if they are regarded as relevant for the success of CSR. Within this instrumental perspective on CSR, the responsibilities toward sustainability issues are fundamentally assigned along a liability logic (Djelic and Quack 2012) which mainly derives from legal reasoning to find guilt or fault for harm (Young 2006).

CSR in this instrumental view is treated as an operational (Suchman 1995) and manageable resource (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990), which provides pragmatic legitimacy to corporate actions. Pragmatic legitimacy has been described as the “organization’s ability to instrumentally manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to gain societal support” (Suchman 1995, p. 572). Furthermore, with time, CSR has become part of the way business should work (Porter and Kramer 2006; Castelló and Lozano 2011) entering in the cultural representation of the role of business. CSR becomes an instrument to gain cognitive legitimacy (Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011). Whereas pragmatic legitimacy relates to the business case of CSR and the strategically produced perception of corporations as being beneficial, cognitive legitimacy is given, when corporations adapt to broader community values or conform to the basic rules of society. Accordingly, *communication* becomes a rhetorically persuasive instrument, a matter of presenting and exploiting the attractive features associated with CSR to create a positive reputation. Also *new media* are regarded as a moderator for CSR, which may be used to further improve the reputation, stakeholder relations, and financial performance of the organization (Capriotti 2011), as it could undergo the classic selection process of traditional media (Esrock and Leichty 1998), improve stakeholder engagement (Fieseler et al. 2010), and better sustain relationships with geographically dispersed stakeholders. As the instrumental view equates potentials

of *new media* with the use of the technologies, it builds on a technology-deterministic argumentation. Although authors increasingly discuss challenges to this positive relation between CSR and financial performance, such as the role of skepticism (Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009), mass media (Brammer and Pavelin 2006), and media reputation (Eisenegger and Schranz 2011), the “business case” itself remains often unquestioned.

#### The Political-Normative View on Corporate Social Responsibilities

As an alternative to the instrumental view recent research on CSR, inspired from sociology and political science, highlights the corporations’ influence in the creation of norms and values and regards corporations as political actors (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). Political theories on CSR discuss for example the power of corporations in society and hence the quest for their responsible behavior (Garriga and Melé 2004). The political-normative view on CSR stresses that companies are not depoliticized, private business actors who try to influence public political processes (Flohr et al. 2010), but rather politically responsible for the setting, implementation, and development of norms and values of contemporary society (Etzioni 1988; Ghoshal 2005; Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011; Crane et al. 2008). The globalization process has changed the institutional environment of global business and the way corporations can maintain their legitimacy. In a globalized world the regulatory power of the nation-state governance system is in decline and cultural homogeneity within social communities is eroding due to processes of migration and individualization (Scherer and Palazzo 2011). The power to address issues of public concern, to define standards for behavior, and to determine the conditions under which social issues can unfold is shifting from state institutions to the corporations and civil society actors. As a result, the corporate environment has become highly complex and ambiguous and corporations have difficulties in maintaining their legitimacy (Scherer and Palazzo 2011). According to Scherer and Palazzo, cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy is not enough to build corporate legitimacy. Corporations need to acquire moral legitimacy (Scherer and Palazzo 2007; Scherer and Palazzo 2011), which reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities (see also Suchman 1995). It refers to conscious moral judgements on the organizations’ outputs, procedures, structures, and leaders (Suchman 1995). However, under conditions of globalization, moral legitimacy can only be gained through communicative deliberative process, in which, building on the Habermasian framework of communicative rationality (1984), the “forceless force of the better argument”, but not the power of participating actors

(Scherer and Palazzo 2011) can legitimize corporate action. Instead of simply adapting to the environment (isomorphic adaptation) or manipulating the perceptions of the most important social constituencies (strategic manipulation) (Scherer and Palazzo 2007; Castelló and Lozano 2011; Castelló and Galang 2012), they need to engage in a process of “moral reasoning” where it is initially not clear whether the corporation or the societal expectations will dominate the resolution, or if a new position will be created (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). Accordingly, *communication* plays an important role in this view. It is argued that moral reasoning *should* be based in a dialogic, “Habermasian” process of deliberative communication with stakeholders (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). Also *new media* are in this view regarded as instruments to gain legitimacy for corporations, as they would further improve the dialogue and engagement toward deliberative democracy and the access to conversations, hereby potentially equalizing power relations (Papacharissi 2010).

## Foundations of the Communicative Framework

### The Communicative Constitution of Organizations in Networked Societies

In the following section we develop our theoretical understanding of a third view on CSR that highlights the role of constitutive communication dynamics. We build on the established constructivist perspectives and communication theories, according to which communication can be defined as the “ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find themselves and of the events that affect them.” (Taylor and van Every 2000, p. 58; see also Koschmann et al. 2012). Communication is, therefore, a socially constitutive process by which through the use of language (discourse) meanings, knowledge, identities, social structures, and the various practices and means of the contact of the organization with the environment are produced, reproduced, or changed (Deetz 1995; Phillips and Hardy 1997). Communication has the function to constitute or organize reality (Putnam and Nicotera 2008; see also Weick 1979, 1995). For this process of meaning construction, media and symbolic representations play a fundamental role. It is argued that human beings live in different symbolic forms, narrations, myths, and discourses that come into being in co-production with others (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Christensen and Cheney 2000, 2011; Schultz 2011), and that dialectically enact not one but many and different realities. In this perspective, communication is not simply a transmission of meaning, but a process within which reality is constituted by the use

of symbols. This is what we refer to as the “communication view.”

This communication view implies a different understanding of companies’ social responsibilities and more fundamentally of *organizations*. If reality is communicatively constituted via media, organizations also cannot be understood as substantial unities or entities, but as constructs that emerge in communication (Taylor and Van Every 2000) and that consist of communications (Koschmann et al. 2012). This idea, that organizations emerge in communication, has been picked up and developed further in the so-called CCO-framework in the past 30 years (Putnam and Nicotera 2008; Ashcraft et al. 2009; Taylor and Van Every 2000; see also Christensen and Cornelissen 2011). As argued in CCO theorizing (Haack et al. 2012), organizations depend on many different and simultaneously occurring voices (Bakhtin 1981), whose polyphony they attempt to integrate (Christensen and Cornelissen 2011). Prior research on the interaction of organizational practices and media representation of this polyphony (Chouliaraki and Morsing 2010; Chen and Meindl 1991; Hayward and Rindova 2004) argues that such symbolic representations of organizational life are important for the constitution of organizations, as they are enacted into new organizational realities as well as new media representations.

### The Medial Construction of Reality via Traditional and New Media

For the communicative constitution of organizations, traditional as well as new media play a fundamental role. Traditional media such as newspapers have always been constitutive for symbolic interaction and the social construction of actors, events, contexts, and interest groups, as they influence and reflect public opinion about organizations (Carroll and McCombs 2003). But they are not neutral actors that simply transmit information. Oftentimes they are owned by multinational corporations. Rather they follow certain logics in their construction of reality by which they emphasize some events, agendas, and vocabularies while downplaying others (Castells 2007), and by which protest-actors and organizations increasingly construct and orient themselves to gain relevance in societal discourses (e.g., via scandalization, symbolic communication, and mediatization of organizations, see Krotz 2007). New media directly contribute to the process of globalization by catalyzing the re-structuring of production dynamics and logics in our “networked economy” (Castells 2000). As communication becomes an underlying structure of value creation, leading to an increasing non-market production, new patterns of production shift in the



value of capital from the instrument to human knowledge and its social network (Benkler 2006). Furthermore, in our networked society, new media such as Facebook and Twitter allow faster, direct interaction, dialogue, and participation across geographically dispersed individuals (Schultz et al. 2011), and increase the connectivity of individuals and organizations fundamentally. This results not only in a significantly more open, reflexive, self-organized, and fluid public, but also in increasing network activism and new social movements (Bennett 2003), who can affect organizations dramatically. It particularly empowers individuals, as recently observed around the emergence of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 and in the rise of the Occupy Wall Street movement starting in the US in 2010. Through social media any citizen, in principle, becomes a communicator herself who is less dependent on traditional gatekeepers such as journalists and journalistic selection logics (Friedland et al. 2006). Accordingly, the power of traditional media in influencing public opinion is expected to decrease.

The rise of new communication technologies, therefore, also changes processes of legitimacy constitution. Legitimacy is not only formed in separate spheres of society, within hierarchical orders of stable institutions or powerful rational elites, as Habermas argued (Habermas 2001), but co-constructed by “networked publics” (Friedland et al. 2006). In these publics, “the new networked structure of communication involves multiple shifts away from the model of communicative socialisation” (p. 24) via political institutions toward a formation of the public mind and herewith legitimacy in the realm of communication. Social and political activities and herewith also legitimacy are formed and constituted through the networks of communication (De Cock 1998) between *dis-hierarchized* actors with partially conflicting views. As such networks are flexible, also the negotiation of private interests and projects reaches a more unstable and “in conflict” point of shared decision making toward a common good, which is valid within a historically given social boundary (Friedland et al. 2006). To summarize, in the networked society new social technologies have allowed legitimacy to occur in mediation processes that emerge between companies and their stakeholders, and many times among stakeholders beyond the company’s sphere of influence. In such a polyphonic environment, companies gain legitimacy via a communicative constitution process that does not provide stability nor guarantee long-term success. Legitimacy is constituted and re-constituted in communicative dynamics.

This general communication view on the interplay of organizations, media, publics and legitimacy is now related to CSR and to the instrumental and political-normative view (see Table 1).

## The Communication View on CSR

### CSR as a Communicative Event

Applying the communication view enables us to better observe complexities of and around CSR in networked societies. Building on this view challenges established instrumental or political-normative understandings of CSR and leads to a different idea of CSR, which has not yet been sufficiently developed (building on CCO: Schultz 2011, 2013; Haack et al. 2012; building on constructivism: Koschmann et al. 2012). We argue that CSR dynamics derive not only from multiple social relations, but that CSR is communicatively constituted in complex and dynamic networks. Different actors such as corporations, government institutions, the media, and consumers organize and negotiate knowledge about the meaning and expectations to corporate responsibility (Caruana and Crane 2008). For example, CSR reports, Facebook pages, and finally newspaper articles reflect corporate ideas of social responsibilities and assumptions about public expectations, and react herewith to what they perceive as the public’s expectations. Within these communication processes, CSR is making sense while also giving sense to actors, as they produce, translate, and integrate CSR into their specific reality constructions (Schultz and Wehmeier 2010). As CSR is a communicative representation of the dynamic continuum of different and competing meanings and narrations about corporate roles in society, CSR is fundamentally a *communicative event* and *symbolic resource*. Accordingly, contemporary organizations cannot expect that the careful orchestration of one consistent and coherent CSR message will result in the achievement of legitimacy across a variety of stakeholders. Rather we propose that CSR as enabler of corporate legitimacy is interactively constituted in communication through ongoing and changing descriptions.

After having proposed a definition of CSR based on communication theories and the context of the networked society, we now turn to the specific contribution to CSR research. We argue that the instrumental and political-normative views on CSR are limited, as they are based on three biases: the *control bias*, the *consistency bias*, and the *consensus bias*. In the following section we enfold these three biases and discuss to what extent and in which way they are implied in both views, and accordingly we analyze how a communication view contributes to an improved understanding of contemporary society’s complex and mediated dynamics of CSR by overcoming these biases.

### Overcoming the Control bias: CSR as Dynamic Process

The instrumental, and partially the political-normative view, build on the idea of control: in the instrumental view

**Table 1** Characteristics of the instrumental, political-normative, and communication views on CSR

Views on CSR	Instrumental view	Political-normative view	Communication view
<i>Institutional characteristics</i>			
Actors	Corporations and stakeholders as rational actors	Corporations as political–moral actors and norm-setters	Individuals in fluid networks
Social relations	Principal–agent, contractual, self-organized	Moral contract, deliberative processes, consensus, external	Symbolically mediated interaction, fluid, relations
<i>Scope of CSR</i>			
Moral communication	Control-oriented: Persuasive, rhetorical strategy to create reputation, conformity and improve financial performance	Consensus-oriented: ethical, dialogic, discursive (deliberative communication) to produce legitimacy building on consistency of words and actions	Conflictive, aspirational, and disintegrative, co-constructed, mediated responsibility
Role of new media	Tool for reputation building (Social technology; Deterministic)	Deliberative, tool for democratization of decision making (Social technology)	Indeterminate platform for symbolic interaction
Legitimacy	Pragmatic legitimacy	Moral legitimacy	Communicative legitimacy
<i>Foundations of CSR</i>			
Key access	Organization-centered and organization-oriented	Organization-centered and society-oriented	Network-oriented
Epistemology and theories	Functionalism and managerialism, corporate social performance, strategic management	Normativism: ethics, political role of firms	Constructivism, CCO Communication Constitutes Organization, network theory

CSR is perceived as a tool to be managed, measured, and controlled by managers in order to achieve desirable reputations and favorable stakeholder relationships. In the political-normative view corporations are assumed in control as they are politically responsible for the setting, implementation, and development of norms and values of contemporary society. Such views do not take into account situations of de-legitimization and that actors may be surrounded by strategic and insistent articulations of dissenting voices beyond corporate control. Both the instrumental and the political-normative views are rooted in the assumption that CSR is organized and defined in an organizational-centric manner (Lozano 2005), i.e., from within the organization vis á vis its stakeholders, where external stakeholders are implicitly or explicitly subjugated to the corporate CSR policies communicated to them. Also tools for engagement such as annual reputation surveys or dialogue meetings are developed to ensure that the voice of stakeholders is heard (Mitchell et al. 1997), but managed and engineered from the corporation (Lozano 2005).

Building on the communication view and its understanding of CSR as constituted in complex, reciprocal communication processes, we argue that managing CSR and legitimacy by controlling multiple publics and complex discourses out of the organization is problematic. Underlying such view is an ideology of “managerialism,” that assumes omnipotent managers (Barley and Kunda 1992). It is problematic because communication is an indeterminate process, in which meaning is not transmitted

but constituted in each interaction and can, therefore, not be centrally controlled. Furthermore, the ability to unilaterally control communication is limited due to the decentralization of communication in indeterminate networks and the complex dynamics enfolded herein. Especially the rise of new media technologies in network societies foster the emergence of critical not-yet-visible, not-yet-active, geographically dispersed, unidentified “dormant stakeholders” or publics, who influence the discourse and hereby disable corporations to control the implications on their CSR practices (Capriotti 2011; Papacharissi 2010). Activists contest corporate messages often via word-of-mouth, anti-blogging, or activist films on Youtube, as the cases of the Chevron campaign “We agree” in 2010 or Arla Foods in 2008 show. Different activist groups emerged here in an “anti-Chevron public” questioning the campaign even before it was launched (Casselmann 2010). In the protest against Arla Foods, geographically dispersed Chinese citizens organized themselves within two weeks in a collective and powerful online series of critique about the Chinese subsidiary’s unfortunate blend of melamine into milk powder, which caused sickness and death to many Chinese children (Wiggins 2008). With social technologies corporations cannot even expect to control messages about the company sent from employees.

This assumption about managerial control (instrumental view) and relatively controlled forms of dialogue (political-normative view) permeating CSR research consequentially limits our understanding of the dynamics in the construction

of legitimacy, because in practice stakeholder perceptions and expectations to corporate responsibility are constituted and changed in fluid networks that often emerge beyond corporate knowledge and control. The acknowledgement of “uncontrol” resulting out of this indeterminacy in turn can provide us in three ways with a more balanced understanding of what is conventionally reduced to being dysfunctional effects of CSR. First, we have to acknowledge that not only direct and positive communication about corporate social responsibilities, but also questions, criticism, formulations of mistrust or disappointments, and break-ups of communication are constitutive for legitimacy. Second, instead of critiquing the lack of a generally accepted definition of CSR, we propose that CSR is better understood as a symbolic resource that is introduced to normalize tensions and enable value differences to co-exist in order to maintain the autopoiesis of the organization and avoid break-ups of communication. Defining CSR as a symbolic resource leaves space for interpretation and development rather than determination. Third, it can be hypothesized that CSR as a communicative and dynamically enacted resource enables trust and deliberative abilities since it acknowledges the plurality of discourses and interpretations.

#### Overcoming the Consistency bias: CSR as Aspirational Talk

In the instrumental view it is assumed that CSR consists of actions, and that actions and the communications about them must be consistent in order to be considered legitimate and trustworthy. Corporations are indeed often criticized by the media and publics for “green-washing”, “blue-washing,” or “spinning” (Laufer 2003; Shamir 2008), which means not behaving according to their CSR proclamations. In academic research, the narrative that CSR means *doing* something good to society, not just *talking* about it, is very common (Holder-Webb et al. 2009; Aras and Crowther 2009; Fernando 2010). It formulates the attempt to identify and, importantly, close “gaps between words and action” (Pomeroy 2011; Waddock and Googins 2011), as this view regards developing consistency between CSR talk and CSR action as necessary for managing legitimacy (Gardberg and Fombrun 2006; Fombrun 2005; see also Vallaster et al. 2012).

Building on the CCO-framework (Taylor and van Every 2000), the communication view regards communication as action and action as communication. Accordingly, the “sharp distinction between communication on the one hand and action on the other” in which action is assumed to be superior to communication (Christensen et al. 2013), and in which a necessary consistency is perceived as a condition for legitimacy, must be questioned. The “consistency bias” limits our understanding of how reality is enacted through

communication, as it disregards the productivity of inconsistencies assuming them to be counterproductive.

From a communicative perspective, building on Christensen and colleagues’ proposal to appreciate CSR as aspirational talk (Christensen et al. 2013), the desire to change the status quo into something presumably better is an inherent property of the CSR discourse. CSR statements are simply reflecting not only current or former organizational CSR practices, but also aspirations or visions about an improved future state (see also Wehmeier and Schultz 2011), or “*aspirational talk*” (Christensen et al. 2013). They may serve as means to improve CSR action if taken as aspirational, because talk becomes a creation with “organizing properties” (Cooren 1999) that makes our perceptions of reality real, including that part of reality which we label CSR. Acknowledging this performative character of CSR communication improves our understanding of how CSR may contribute to change and set new standards for corporate social action.

CSR is in this view also related to moral communication. The concept of “moral communication” (Schultz 2011) not only refers to the performativity and future-relatedness of specifically moral statements, but also points furthermore to the metaphorical character of moral communication, based on which it can invisibilize (Schultz 2011) structural and partially conflicting conditions in complex societies and allow for statements, which can hardly be evaluated as wrong or false. In the CSR context, moral communication expresses orientations of action, but raises among stakeholders certain expectations to corporate behavior, based on which corporations are now evaluated. However, if they, due to the invisibilized conditions, are rarely fulfilled, moral communication can lead to a kind of entrapment (Schultz 2011; see also Haack et al. 2012). In this sense moral communication does not only legitimize corporations, but also delegitimizes them and produces its own demand (see also Schultz and Wehmeier 2010).

#### Overcoming the Consensus bias: CSR as Polyphonic Concept

The instrumental as well as the political-normative view on CSR argue that legitimacy is built on consensus. Whereas this consensus is in the first view quite unidirectionally produced and determined by the organization, it is in the latter view constituted as indetermined in a “Habermasian dialogue” situation involving a range of societal actors (Scherer and Palazzo 2007). From a communication view, this focus on consensus is problematic. It first does not reflect, that there are many unplanned, non-intentional, and emotion-based interactions, which may constitute dissent, protest, or conflict in unpredictable ways and result in collective, powerful voices that critique corporations but

exclude them from being involved in a rational, dialogic way. Neither does it reflect that agendas may be conquered by non-participants and changed and strengthened, as in the case of Chevron. Furthermore, we regard the plurality of conflicting voices as a necessary condition for legitimacy building (Latour 2005), because that the current complex and fragmented media society is already built around the existence of different voices, dissent and conflicting or even incommensurate values (Schultz 2011; see also Leitch and Davenport 2007).

As the public web sphere is characterized by a continuous emergence and plurality of narratives, legitimacy is accordingly emerging rather than strategically manufactured (Giroux, 2006), and consensus is more an intermediate stage and convention or agreement that is valid till the next point in time, when it is confronted with other expectations and values. CSR is, therefore, better understood as “a forum for sense-making, diversity of opinion, and debate over the social norms and expectations attached to corporate activity” (Guthey and Morsing, forthcoming).

In the communication view dissent and conflict are important sources for social change, rather than consensus and agreement (May 2011). As argued above, the articulation of new and differing realities drives change, as it enriches perceptions and can produce tensions that prospectively guide actions. These tensions can, according to Guthey and Morsing (ibid), be understood as a “crowded and multi-directional process of mediation,” in which CSR is not necessarily “the intended end-result of the purposeful activity of stakeholders pursuing their perceived interest in a concerted manner” nor the expression of a “unified coalition of movement toward collective action” (Guthey and Morsing: ibid).

These insights also lead to an appreciation of CSR as a discursively open, aspirational, and polyphonic concept that is powerful, because it is based on moral communication: it is able to invisibilize the underlying incommensurability between conflicting societal values and expectations, and, therefore, brings together diverse, potentially conflicting social norms and expectations. As such, it gives the unique capacity to engage multiple voices and embrace complexity in a way that other concepts may not, and is capable of serving as a catalyst for important discussions about companies’ ability to lead economic, social, and environmental change (Christensen et al. 2013).

If we acknowledge the conflictive character of CSR and the importance of the disagreements and dissensual elements for its definition, then we may propose that uniform and agreed-upon debates over CSR definitions are not necessary for legitimacy, but might potentially distort the dialogue and close off the debate among different interests groups about corporate responsibilities (Deetz 1995). The managerial desire to demonstrate unity on CSR might

result in suppression of the many different voices and of the experiences deriving from conflicts and hereby “the tension of difference is lost” (Deetz 1992, p. 188).

## Conclusion and Future Research

Today’s global spread of CSR as a management concept and business practice fosters and expresses fundamental institutional challenges in business and society. The point of departure of this paper is the observation that the revolution of new information and communication technologies leads to societal transformations and changes in the configuration of corporate social responsibility. Today’s networked societies (Castells 2000; Bennett 2003) are characterized by networked economies with de-centrality and globalization of capital and production and, not at least, by networked publics with a continuously changing interplay and high connectivity between organizations, stakeholders, and (new) media, which all foster organizational and societal change.

We argue that established instrumental and political-normative views on CSR do not take the role of media and networked communication sufficiently into account. They provide us with an insufficient understanding of the complex dynamics around CSR and its formation of responsibilities and legitimacy among businesses and publics, as they are biases. Three biases—the *control-bias*, the *consensus-bias*, and the *consistency-bias*—invisibilize decoupling processes and inconsistencies of CSR and address these as counterproductive exceptions instead of as constitutive moments of CSR. Both the instrumental and political-normative views prioritize organizational-centric and hierarchical forms of negotiation above plurality of voices in the process of legitimacy construction (control bias). They tend to invisibilize disintegrative moments of decoupling as they prioritize a tight alignment between words and action, neglecting the communicative construction of reality via aspirational talk (consistency bias). In the pursuit of consensus and order, they also downplay the potential productiveness of maintaining polyphony (consensus bias).

To overcome these limitations, we suggest the contours of a new theoretical perspective on CSR—the *communication view*. The communication view on CSR takes a constructivist perspective and defines communication as symbolically mediated interaction. Building on the CCO-framework, it regards organizations as being constituted in communication. Furthermore, it acknowledges the influential and constitutive role of media in the configuration, organization, and presentation of corporations, and of their relations in the dynamic, multilevel interplay of business and society. It points to the significantly more open,



reflexive, self-organized, and fluid public sphere, in which the presence of active, networked publics challenge the ideas in current views on CSR about control and hierarchical orders, the need for consistency between action and talk, and the importance of consensus-based dialogue for the construction of CSR.

In the communication view, CSR is a matter not only of legal liability, brand value, or social connectedness, but also of *communicative connectedness* between organizations, media, and stakeholders. Responsibility is not only instrumentally manufactured or normatively achieved in separate spheres of society or in a pre-established negotiations, but co-constructed in networks of increasingly undefined publics and power relations in a technologically mediated communication universe, where communication itself remains indeterminate and decentralized. CSR becomes a forum for exchange, dissent, and challenge of organizational and societal values via which identities are constructed and realities changed. Accordingly, we consider corporate social responsibilities in networked societies as *communicative events* and *symbolic resources* that are co-constituted between organizations and publics and mediated in communication networks, and that serve to maintain the self-organization, i.e., autopoiesis, and symbolic reproduction of organizational and societal legitimacy.

Further research needs to expand these contours of a communication view on CSR in order to broaden our understanding of CSR in a theoretical framework that holds network society as its contextual premise. In the following we propose four paths for future research to explore the communicative view on CSR. First, the communication view calls for discussing the definition of CSR *as a communicatively constituted phenomenon*. We believe that future research on CSR needs to look into the communicative challenges and potentials for social change deriving from conflict and dissent fundamental to the legitimization process in the networked society. For example, as media are fundamental for the global spread and institutionalization of CSR, the communication view opens up for studies that analyze the challenges to transnational legitimacy construction across geographically dispersed regions, cultures, and understandings of the role of businesses in society.

Second, CSR research needs to study organizations as communication networks (Blaschke et al. 2012) and to analyze the dynamics and networked interplay between media, organizations, and public. As the Internet ties up communication and social networks, changes in opinions or expectations (*semantic networks*) may more rapidly effect the relation of people and organizations (*social networks*), and vice versa. We see a need for applying and combining empirical semantic network analyses (Monge and Contractor 2001) and social network analysis (Wang

and Groth 2010). Recent studies set already the methodological seed investigating the dynamics of communication between organizations and media (Baden 2010) with their public (Chouliaraki and Morsing 2010). More knowledge is necessary to define the impacts of networks in moral-based communications around CSR.

Third, we propose that future research explores the *antecedent* and *ex post* processes of CSR communication when it serves as decoupled yet aspirational and agenda-setting discourses as opposed to decoupled and hypocritical “empty promises.” While prior research on CSR has pointed to the need for tight coupling between words and actions on CSR, we have with the communication view on CSR pointed to the potential performativity of aspirational talk. Yet, when we propose more theorizing and empirical studies based on a communication view to investigate the subtle balances between CSR aspirations and CSR hypocrisy.

Fourth, and finally, we point toward the need for future research to discuss the role of moral communication as a form of values-based, non-rational, emotionally touched communication with its potential effects of breaking up instead of maintaining discourses. In this regard we need to develop a new definition of legitimacy in order to better understand agentic moments of inclusion and exclusion and of social integration and disintegration related to each particular CSR practices for different actors (Schultz 2011). In highly individualistic and polyphonic environments, legitimacy is constituted and re-constituted on communicative dynamics and we propose that future research explores how and in what ways such “communicative legitimacy” refers to the legitimacy of actors to take part in discourses.

As these final remarks underline, the proposed communication view on CSR lends itself to further development and holds much potential for developing a new communication-based research agenda within the field of CSR.

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