Chapter: A critical reflection on the role of dialogue in communicating ethical CSR through digital platforms

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Introduction

Organizations are under increasing pressure to communicate to stakeholders their position and policies on social responsibility, informing them about the corporation's good intentions and actions. This pressure has intensified in a global context marked by constant change and whereby more critical, demanding citizens using emerging new technologies. This context has been cited by the Melbourne Mandate of the Global Alliance (MMGA)[1] as signaling a need for changes in organizational approaches to CSR communication. The changes, according to the MMGA, demands a corporate culture of listening, management commitment and responsible action if organizations are to retain or restore their social legitimacy. Hence corporations' dissemination and communication of CSR information needs more effective forms of engagement with stakeholders through symmetrical relations.[2] In initiating a two way symmetrical dialogue with stakeholders, organizations have an opportunity to understand their perspective, respond to criticism[3] and reduce stakeholder scepticism.[4] Dialogue is 'a process in which parties with different interests and values at stake in a particular issue work together towards mutually acceptable solutions'.[5] Thus, a dialogue is essential for someone or an entity to speak and listen to the thoughts, opinions and responding to the interlocutor to meet the ethical premise for responsibility.[6] The emergence of digital hardware and software platforms such as Facebook or Twitter provides managers with mechanisms that have the potential for a dialogue with stakeholders to communicate their CSR initiatives and policies. These digital platforms allow managers and corporations to listen and respond to stakeholders and their concerns in an open and honest discourse. Through this connection of digital platforms and dialogue, corporations have an opportunity to meet the ethical premise of responsibility. On the other hand, the notion that digital platforms are an opportunity for organizations to interact with stakeholders, transforming a passive observer into an active participant, has been challenged.[7] Rather, in this view, digital platforms result not in interactivity but interpassivity (a combination of interactive and passive), and the illusion of being empowered, which is, however, a deferral of the interaction to the device or the digital platform to act or interact on our behalf with the participation of an automated "like" or "dislike" response rather than a dialogue. This critique suggests that digital platforms are the mechanism but not the foundation for an ethical premise for CSR whereby people and entities participate in an active dialogue. Given this critique we probe whether or not organizations are able to satisfy and enact the ethical premise of CSR. Our

contextual emphasis is on the potential for implementing the ethical premise of CSR in large organizations which due to more scrutiny by governments, NGOs and other publics are more likely to use a wide range of one way or two way interactive tools to communicate their corporate social responsibility to a varied audience. [8]

To achieve the central aim of the chapter we explore the ethical premise of responsibility and its connection to the concept of dialogue as a basis for assessing if, how and why digital platforms can or cannot meet the ethical premise and dialogic prerequisite for CSR. We then discuss the implications and make recommendations for implementing the ethical premise of CSR into an organization. In the first section of the chapter we define and clarify the ethical premise of CSR.

The ethical premise of CSR

According to Gibb responsibility is asymmetric as I, nor another party, can be held responsible for the actions of each other and 'this ethics requires me to respond for the actions of others, actions I could neither cause nor control'.[9] The ethical premise for responsibility rests not only on entering a discourse but that I also listen and expose myself to the other person. 'In discourse I expose myself to the interrogation of the Other Person and this urgency of response - the sharp point of the present - engenders me for responsibility'. [10] Ethical responsibility comes from someone or an entity listening to the thoughts and opinions and responding to the interlocutor – 'we listen in order to gain responsibility; by making ourselves vulnerable to questioning, we become responsible'.[11] Habermas [12] extends the ethical premise of responsibility to a discourse among all those affected 'in a cooperative search for truth, in which they may come to the conclusion by the force of a better argument…on which rests the fundamental principle of discourse ethics' The capacity to listen, sense of openness, being vulnerable to questioning and responsiveness necessitates establishing a moral legitimacy of conforming to the norms of society through a deliberative discourse with internal and external publics. [13] In the corporate context moral legitimacy is where stakeholders' views reflect a normative and positive evaluation of a corporation and its activities on the basis of what they see as the "right thing to do" [14] as an outcome of "explicit public discussion". [15] Corporations bear the political responsibilities [16] through discourse in the four Habermasian validity claims of communicative action,

which are truth, sincerity, understandability and appropriateness. Further, discourse also meets the political CSR criteria of open discourse, participation, transparency and accountability. [17]

In the next section we discuss CSR communication theory, the connection of the concept of dialogue with the ethical premise of responsibility.

CSR communication theory, dialogue and the ethical premise

Organizations signal their economic, social and environmental initiatives through CSR communication [18] which is a tool to enhance their corporate and public image [19] and to gain legitimacy and support from different stakeholder groups.[20] Here we define stakeholders as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives', [21] who are located internally (owners, managers, employees) or externally (government, competitors, customers, consumer advocates, environmentalists, media, NGOs, and activists). Companies use a range of channels in their CSR communication with stakeholders, such as social reports, codes of conduct, CSR websites, stakeholder consultations, internal channels, awards and events, cause-related marketing, product packaging, advertising and its own social media channels.[22] Further, interactive CSR communication allowing for stakeholder involvement in a common setting of a CSR agenda with organizations, contributes to a feeling of self-enhancement and the belief that companies engage in CSR for responsible and societal reasons. [23] For external stakeholders', independent media coverage of CSR is more credible than what corporations say about their CSR initiatives, [24] as such information helps them to make a balanced assessment and gain a sense of an organizations social responsibility claims.[25] Proactive CSR communication strategies through the use of expert opinion, third party endorsements and substantiation in the form of CSR investments in for example financial and in-kind contributions, or employee volunteering, have been found to mitigate the levels of perceived hypocrisy than a reactive strategy.[26]

While organizations have made use of such policies to gain legitimacy a few have gone further to embed the ethical premise of CSR into their core mission. This has been achieved through listening to and having an open, honest conversation with and responding to stakeholders concerns. This requires corporations to adopt a 'dialogic mindset' [27] to express a manifestation of

inner thoughts and exploration of understanding each other which is 'itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique or format'. Dialogue transcends the view that is limited to particular interests and endeavors to seek for 'a persistent effort to reach the truth' [28] 'whereby parties with different interests and values at stake on a particular issue work together towards mutually acceptable solutions.'[29] This we argue, is a fundamental element of the ethical premise of responsibility connecting dialogue and ethical CSR.

A pioneer in and exemplar of the dialogic 'conversational corporation' [30] and participatory approaches before the emergence of digital platforms was the Body Shop. Their 1996 Social Statement 95's was "one of the most sensitive in feeding stakeholder concerns into the design of the survey and other dialogic tools". [31] Several decades of experience in developing participatory approaches which pass through evolutionary stages in a laddering from 'dialogue shifts' at the bottom, to higher levels "that involves the exploration, appreciation and in some instances acceptance of the interests of others". [32] Achieving an effective dialogue at the higher levels requires a shift from a give and take debate to a dialogue and learning, which leads to understanding something differently and an evolution of purpose beyond what is currently possible. For example, the Body Shop's definition of stakeholder dialogue is "a genuine process of sharing each other's perspectives with a view to tackling a joint issue. It assumes you are willing to change your views. It is the spirit of seeking out and valuing the views of others'". [33] As digital platforms are widely acknowledged as an interactive media, there is potential to use them as a mechanism for a dialogue, in a participatory communication process [34] to meet the ethical premise for CSR, which we explore in the next section.

Digital platforms as a dialogical mechanism for the ethical premise of CSR

Digital platforms such as blogs, Facebook, wikis, Twitter, or Instagram [35] enable users to interact and connect with each through user-generation, information sharing, and collaboration. Corporations including Ford have set up corporate CSR blogs to engage with opinion leaders on the issue of sustainability; McDonald's manages a weblog whereby employees' blog and

respond to users' comments openly and transparently, which is highly interactive. [36] Starbucks uses a Twitter account to respond to consumers CSR comments; and Cisco Systems focus on NGOs, CSR bloggers using a Twitter account created to engage with highly interested stakeholders. [37] However, while corporate weblogs encourage a dialogue, it is dedicated to a corporation's key constituents with the purpose of informing and persuading them.[38] Other digital platforms, such as Wikis, which is administered and edited by any user, means that the corporation is not in control of who participates (for example see Apple (www.apple.wikia.com). [39] However, such dialogue-based blogs face the criticism that they are instrumental, company-centric and biased rather than deliberative, and largely conducted with groups of experts or individuals rather than a wider audience. [40] Despite this view the exploration of digital platforms as a dialogic medium has intensified in the literature on public relations and corporate communication over the course of the last ten years[41]. To date there has been a focus on two approaches; one is the dissemination of information and the other is the generation of a dialogue between the different publics and the organization. [42] In the first approach, the level of interactivity is low, and a digital platform is used as a monological mechanism to communicate fixed information to influence the image of the company amongst its various publics. [43] In the second approach, a digital platform has the potential to be a mechanism for an organizational dialogue to maintain an open-ended conversation with their publics. Further, it is also a space where stakeholders have opportunities to share their opinions about corporate initiatives, decisions and activities. Hence, digital platforms have the potential to be a mechanism for a dialogue between the organization and its different stakeholders if the discourse is based on openness, listening, responding and a change in ideas [44] which is the ethical premise of CSR.

Despite examples of organizations engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders about CSR issues, extant research depicts a situation whereby organizations are practicing a one way transmission, public information and transactional model of communication. [45] In taking this approach organizations are not opening up an opportunity for a dialogue with their publics [46] and instead use digital platforms for dissemination purposes. [47] Posting content on digital platforms 'does not mean that those contents created conversations among the followers of organizations' social media, or that organizations have a dialogue or, still less a relationship with their followers', rather 'conversations emerge as a result of sharing information that arouses interest in someone, but also from the presentation of content that stimulate an individuals' interest and

curiosity, or that simply respond to information-seeking needs'.[48] Neither conversations, nor two-way communications, can take place if individuals do not create, share content, or respond to existing content with comments. In digital platforms, information is available from the moment it is created and often transmitted by the participants themselves or by eyewitnesses. This acceleration has driven organizations, advised by digital agencies, to respond to comments immediately with limited time for reflection. Such an approach may not establish the basis for a CSR dialogue with stakeholders as it places a greater emphasis on response rather than responsibility.[49]

Digital platforms, which are not administered and set up by corporations, have three main characteristics: the de-institutionalization of communication, the evolution of users as producers, and interactivity in networks.[50] Digital platforms can, in this context, empower users to create and filter content according to their own interests and share them within their own networks. Through digital platforms, organizations have the opportunity to communicate directly and mutually with their stakeholders[51] in an involvement strategy[52] changing the landscape for organizational communication of CSR which:

> "sketches an inherent double-sidedness in user participation and associated patterns and values of 'produsage' in social media: the user is simultaneously an empowered, productive agent".[53]

As a first step, organizations can use digital platforms to deliver information to their relevant stakeholder groups as they are actively looking for it [54], and that 'the thirst for information facilitated by digital platforms asks for more ongoing and regular engagement in CSR will expose business to a much more direct and visible scrutiny by the general publics'.[55] Through a lack of transparency and substantial information in communication, an organization could face accusations of greenwashing spread virally in a short space of time. Consequently, organizations are under more pressure to be socially responsible in digital platforms, [56] resulting in decreasing organizational power to control public opinion. [57] The diversity of digital platforms fragments audiences making it difficult for organizations to identify and engage with relevant interest groups. [58] Conversely, digital platforms give stakeholders access to information they could not reach before, [59] and organizations may establish a much more intense and interactive CSR communication network with them resulting in higher levels of belief in the commitment

to CSR activities. [60] But organizations tend to use digital platforms like other mass communication channels and mainly distribute information in a one-way communication approach. [61] Interactivity levels of digital CSR communication are generally low as organizations behave passively on digital platforms and only react when directly addressed. [62] Furthermore, higher levels of corporate dialogue do not necessarily lead to diverse networks with high densities of dialogue about CSR, instead organizations tend to develop their own audiences fostering an interest in specific organizational content. [63] Research to evaluate three communication strategies (information, response, involvement) [64] in the context of digital platforms identified the three strategies used on Twitter as broadcasting, reactive, and engagement, revealed that most organizations follow a broadcasting strategy and only few communicate according to the engagement strategy.

We argue that for corporations to meet the ethical premise for CSR set out in our chapter organizations have to adopt new approaches in their communication processes to remove the conditions of structural power. [65] Taking a deliberative approach towards CSR communication meaning 'consideration, discussion, and weighting of ideas with multiple actors (in digital platforms) implies a balance of power of actors involved and democratic will formation based on ethical discourse combined with economic bargaining'. [66] Thus, deliberative CSR communication is seen less as an instrument of organizational self-serving goals but more of a situation where 'people organize collectively to regulate or transform some aspects of their social conditions, along with the communicative activities in which they try to persuade one another to join such collective actions or decide which direction they wish to take.' [67] The deliberative rather than the instrumental approach is a more appropriate basis for meeting the ethical premise (capacity to listen, sense of openness, being vulnerable to questioning and responsiveness) for CSR communication in digital platforms. However, not all digital 'tools of CSR communication take into account…the normative demands of open discourse.' [68]

While digital platforms are a potential mechanism for establishing a dialogic discourse with others in order to meet the ethical premise of CSR, other factors have to be taken into consideration which we discuss in the next section.

Implications: meeting the ethical premise of CSR communication in digital platforms

In our introduction to this chapter we argued that while there was potential for digital platforms to satisfy the conditions of the ethical premise of CSR other factors have to be taken into consideration. Organizations using digital platforms for automated CSR messages to stakeholders without recognising the importance of a dialogical mindset at the top management level will, we argue, fail to meet the requirements for the ethical premise of CSR. While there are instances of where corporations are willing to hold an open and responsive dialogue with a wider audience, digital platforms as a mechanism for establishing the ethical premise for CSR and how such an approach could be adopted in organizations is still unclear.[69] Prior research suggests that stakeholders are sceptical about the CSR efforts of organizations seeing this as part of an attempt to appear responsible while continuing to practice irresponsibility.[70] If organizations are genuinely interested in overcoming such scepticism, top managers need to re-think their approach towards CSR communication through embracing a spirit of openness, dialogue and responsiveness to establish an ethical premise of responsibility set out in this chapter. Digital platforms provide a basis for ethical CSR, in a dialogue and response communication between the corporation and its stakeholders. Achieving this goal is a significant challenge for organizations and communication managers who adopt an instrumental digital CSR communication approach of information dissemination rather than a dialogical and response approach. Organizations are, understandably, reluctant to open up dialogues with stakeholders to expose the corporation in all of their areas of their business. However, they need to respond as digital platforms are exposing corporations to high levels of scrutiny which is beyond their control. A proactive approach acknowledging that mistakes are made in their business operations and communicating and discussing these issues through digital platforms signals a serious attempt to listen and respond to criticism.

There are, however, no easy solutions, single schemas or 'dashboards' to be offered to meet the requirements of the ethical premise of CSR. However, digital platforms in conjunction with setting specific CSR objectives, and managers adopting a dialogic mindset, listening to the view of others about their concerns on a specific issue would fulfil the ethical premise of responsibility. As a starting point for our recommendations we propose that communication managers address two fundamental questions they need to consider and answer, which are:

To what extent do we as an organization and management team believe in the ethical premise of CSR that by listening to the thoughts, opinions and responding to the interlocutor – 'we listen in order to gain responsibility; by making ourselves vulnerable to questioning, we become responsible'?

If we accept this ethical premise are we willing to incorporate it into our strategy and organizational practices?

If managers believe in the ethical premise of CSR, and are willing to introduce this into their organizational practices then the next step is how would this approach be implemented?

It is to this question that we now turn to make practical recommendations for implementing an ethical premise of CSR in an organization. In table 1 we summarise our recommendations into 5 stages. In stage 1 we recommend that organizations take into consideration structural issues, such as who would be responsible and at what levels? In our judgement to achieve the ethical premise of CSR then there has to be a commitment to a digital platform as mechanism for a dialogic listening and responding approach at the top management level. This could mean allocation of responsibility to an existing communication director or if there is no appropriate board member to recruit externally. Whoever is delegated or recruited it would need to be someone who has the appropriate sensitivity and commitment to the ethical premise of a dialogic listening and response mindset. Further, the communication director should also have an understanding of how this dialogue with stakeholders would be deployed through digital platforms. The director of communication would then be responsible for taking this strategy forward with the communication manager and their team. If outside expertise in the area of digital platforms is lacking then the organization should recruit people with the necessary skills and experience into the team. The communication director, manager and their team would need to ensure that the policy and approach continues to have the attention of the board members and has 'political' weight at the top level. Following this a corporate wide commitment to ethical CSR should be diffused and cascaded to employees through internal events and meetings to embed the approach into the practices of the organization. We also recommend that as digital platforms span and blur the lines between the organization and the external environment that an ethical intrapreneur be identified. This would be someone within the organization who would act as a 'broker' taking direct responsibility for initiatives to sustain the ethical premise of CSR through a dialogic discourse with the stakeholders. Further, we would recommend an

organization develops a systematic cooperation with groups who represent the central CSR issues facing the corporation who are situated outside of the organization. [71] In stage 2 we recommend connecting the specific CSR issue and objective to the identification of the appropriate stakeholders with which to have a dialogue.

In stage 2 decisions' would have to be made as to which stakeholders would be included in the CSR dialogue. We recommend primary research to identify the specific stakeholders and the levels of their involvement with CSR such as lobby groups, forums, individuals, and the areas and societal issues where they have the most involvement and motivation. This same exercise would be carried out with internal employee stakeholders. We recommend this approach so that organizations would be able to have some initial scope and boundaries to launch and implement the ethical premise for CSR in digital platforms. This can then be extended in an iterative and dynamic manner in response to events and issues that occur in their business environment.

Table 1 Recommendations for implementing the ethical premise of CSR into an organization[72]

Stage 1: Structural considerations – who would be responsible for implementing a ethically based digital CSR approach and at what level(s)? Inclusion of ethical intrapreneurs – brokers between the inside and outside of the organization.
Stage 2: Inclusiveness – who is to be included in the digital CSR dialogue?
Stage 3: What would be the most appropriate digital platform?
Stage 4: Responsiveness – degree to which the various stakeholder parties respond to the dialogue (not exclusively internal parties).
Stage 5: Outcomes – what actually happens as a consequence of the dialogue?

In stage 3 we recommend an audit is carried out of how and why stakeholders use digital platforms to select the most appropriate means of communication and digital platforms for different stakeholders and levels of engagement.

Stages 4 and 5 are essential for the implementation of the ethical premise of CSR as there should be a response from an individual or entity as the basis for a dialogue. Whilst stakeholders may have the intention to respond this may not occur with a high degree of frequency and intensity. Therefore we recommend that organizations use a hybrid of digital platforms and offline communications through meetings and events, inside and outside of the organization with stakeholders to stimulate interest and intensity of dialogue. Stage 5 is where the organization has to demonstrate to stakeholders that they have listened to and made changes in response the dialogue. This could take many forms in terms of for example organizational change, initiatives and actions.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to examine and probe the ethical premise of CSR communication which requires a corporation to listen to and respond to the questioning of an interlocutor in a dialogue. The emergence of digital platforms has changed the landscape of CSR communication from one in which the corporation is in control of the communication through dissemination of information to stakeholders, to one whereby stakeholders communicate with each other out of the control of organizations. In this more open environment organizations are challenged and questioned about their CSR performance and called upon to respond through digital platforms. In this new, challenging environment the practice and research on how organizations cope with the pressures of digital communication of CSR is only just emerging. We argue, that organizations should take a step back to apply the ethical premise of CSR communication based on a dialogue and response to stakeholders. Through such an approach of open dialogue, accepting criticism, responding to questioning and action based on the outcome of the discourse organizations could fundamentally change the self-serving and instrumental public perception of corporations.

Limitations and future research

Our chapter is a conceptual piece and therefore we have not sought to explore the ethical premise of CSR through, for example, case studies, which is a limitation. Future research could explore the challenges of operationalizing the ethical premise of CSR through case studies and

interviews with communication managers. However, we have provided a critical perspective grounded in the ethical premise of responsibility for future researchers to use as a basis for an empirical study. This would help further our understanding of the nuances and challenges of implementing the ethical premise of CSR and dialogical mindset through digital platforms within organizations. A further limitation of the chapter is that we have explored the ethical premise of CSR in large organizations and hence do not claim to generalize our findings to other contexts such as SMEs. Hence, future research could explore the ethical premise of CSR, dialogue and digital platforms in the context of SMEs.

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