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The use of social media for engaging stakeholders in sustainability reporting

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# The use of social media for engaging stakeholders in sustainability reporting

Use of social  
media for  
engaging  
stakeholders

985

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to assess if online interaction through social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, represents an effective stakeholder engagement mechanism in order to define the contents of social, environmental, or sustainability reporting (SESR).

**Design/methodology/approach** – After examining 332 worldwide sustainability reports for the year 2013, drawn up according to the guidelines provided by the Global Reporting Initiative, the authors conducted a content analysis on the Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube pages of the organisations who rely on these types of social media. This was done in order to assess the scope of interaction between the organisation and its stakeholders.

**Findings** – The authors found that a small number of organisations use social media to engage stakeholders as a means of defining the contents of SESR, and that the level of interaction is generally low. Rather than assuming a deliberative approach that is aimed at forging a democratic consensus on how to address specific corporate social responsibility or SESR issues, these types of interaction focus on gathering divergent socio-political views in an agonistic perspective.

**Research limitations/implications** – Further research could complement this exploratory research with statistical analyses. It could focus on how comments/replies by users are used by organisations and examine the impacts of SESR on companies' performances.

**Originality/value** – The authors contribute to the literature on social accounting by understanding whether social media can be reliable instruments of stakeholder engagement and by examining the relevance of information that is voluntarily disclosed by corporations in SESR.

**Keywords** Facebook, Social and environmental accounting, Corporate social responsibility, Twitter, Social media, Stakeholder engagement

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades stakeholder dialogue and engagement have played a fundamental role in defining the contents of social, environmental, or sustainability reporting (hereafter, SESR) in accordance with the principle of materiality and relevance of information disclosed (Unerman and Bennett, 2004; Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), 2013). Stakeholder engagement is a milestone corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy because it allows one party (the organisation) to interact with another (the stakeholder) in a two-way dialogue in which the engager and engaged mutually learn from such contacts, deeply revising their expectations and preconceptions (Manetti, 2011; Owen *et al.*, 2001). In this sense, stakeholder engagement is a powerful tool of dialogic communication and accounting (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a; Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013b) that offers interactive mutual learning processes that are capable of promoting transformative action and social change (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a, p. 357).

According to Unerman and Bennett (2004), three key problems are associated with stakeholder engagement initiatives: identifying and reaching a wide range of



stakeholders; determining a consensus set of stakeholder expectations from a range of potentially mutually exclusive views held by different stakeholders; and engaging them in an authentic two-way conversation. This does not exclude the possibility for stakeholders to communicate with each other without the intermediation of corporations that hold “legitimate interests” (Evan and Freeman, 1988; Friedman and Miles (2006)). Among the instruments and techniques of stakeholder engagement, a leading and crucial role is played by online interaction, using the organisation’s social media, social networks, blogs, websites, and other technologies linked to the internet (see e.g. Kent *et al.*, 2003; Manetti *et al.*, 2016; Park and Reber, 2008; Rybako and Seltzer, 2010; Unerman and Bennett, 2004).

In this study we explore the utilisation of social media (with particular reference to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, and Flickr) as an instrument of stakeholder engagement in SESR in identifying, dialoguing with, and engaging the largest possible number of organisation stakeholders (Swift *et al.*, 2001; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012), while also taking into account their opinions and expectations, even if they diverge from the organisation’s point of view. More specifically, we study the role played by social media in promoting a democratic debate on CSR issues (Unerman and Bennett, 2004) in order to define the contents of SESR.

We believe that social media and social networks are powerful mechanisms for reaching and keeping in touch with a large number of stakeholders, thus guaranteeing an interactive dialogue with them at very low costs. This internet-based dialogue can also contribute to creating a process of authentic stakeholder engagement based on a democratic – even if not necessarily convergent – consultation of stakeholder opinion. We aim to help fill the gap in the CSR literature on this topic by employing the theoretical framework of dialogic accounting, which has been discussed by many authors in the last decade (see e.g. Dillard and Ruchala, 2005; Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a; Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b).

Our exploratory research question is whether online interaction through social media represents an effective stakeholder engagement mechanism in order to define the contents of SESR. In the process of answering this question we will:

- investigate the role of stakeholder engagement in defining the contents of SESR according to the principles of materiality and relevance of information disclosed, and the specific contribution of social media and web 2.0 in creating a model of authentic dialogic accounting;
- conduct a content analysis of a sample of worldwide sustainability reports on the use of social media in engaging stakeholders in order to define the contents of SESR;
- observe and analyse the online social media pages of corporations who declare in their reports that they use these tools for interacting with their stakeholders; and
- reach a conclusion on the contribution of the aforementioned instruments of web 2.0 to stakeholder engagement and, indirectly, fulfilling the materiality and relevance of SESR.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Stakeholder theory scholars have tried to classify the relational models between organisations and stakeholders by assuming a gradual growth of stakeholder involvement and participation (Svendsen, 1998; Waddock, 2002). First, the organisation identifies and maps its stakeholders, if possible distinguishing between primary parties

(those who are strategic in the middle to long term) and secondary parties (stakeholders that do not affect its sustainability) (Clarkson, 1995, pp. 92-117). Second, it tries to manage stakeholders' expectations and the claims they support in accordance with their salience (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), while also balancing these various positions through a process of stakeholder management (O'Dwyer, 2005). In the last step, organisations try to engage primary stakeholders in decision-making processes, making them participants in organisation management and governance, sharing information, dialoguing, and creating a model of mutual responsibility.

The stakeholder engagement phase, unlike the stakeholder mapping and management phase, "creates a dynamic context of interaction, mutual respect, dialogue and change, not a unilateral management of stakeholders" (Andriof *et al.*, 2002, p. 9). As a result, the main feature of stakeholder engagement is not to encourage the mere involvement of stakeholders to "mitigate" or manage their expectations, but to create a network of mutual responsibility (Andriof *et al.*, 2002, p. 15; Unerman and Bennett, 2004; Voss *et al.*, 2005; Windsor, 2002, p. 138). We are particularly interested in stakeholder engagement since, according to the literature, it is strictly connected with the principles of materiality and relevance for defining the content of SESR (Manetti, 2011). These principles suggest that stakeholder engagement determines which information and data should be included in the report (Gray, 2000, pp. 249-250). International standards and guidelines for SESR require stakeholder engagement as a compulsory stage in order to produce a complete and useful document for the intended users (AccountAbility, 2011; GRI, 2013).

Many scholars over the last decade have collected empirical evidence regarding unprecedented levels of stakeholder dialogue in SESR, while also questioning the sincerity and the impact of these practices on sustainability reports (UNEP and Sustainability, 1999; Miles *et al.*, 2002; Downey, 2002; ACCA, 2005). According to sustainability reporting guidelines 4.0 of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI): "The organization should identify its stakeholders, and explain how it has responded to their reasonable expectations and interests. Stakeholders can include those who are invested in the organization as well as those who have other relationships to the organization. The reasonable expectations and interests of stakeholders are a key reference point for many decisions in the preparation of the report". And again: "Organizations are faced with a wide range of topics on which they could report. Relevant topics are those that may reasonably be considered important for reflecting the organization's economic, environmental and social impacts, or influencing the decisions of stakeholders, and, therefore, potentially merit inclusion in the report" (GRI, 2013, pp. 16-17).

It is safe to say that stakeholder engagement is not only at the very core of SESR, but SESR itself has the characteristics of a dialogic process that examines accountability relationships between stakeholders and organisations (Gray *et al.*, 1997). A dialogic system, in fact, extends beyond notions of communication and refers to iterative mutual learning processes that are designed to promote transformative action. According to Brown (2009), dialogic processes inform accountability relationships between stakeholders and organisations (Gray *et al.*, 1997). This is why previous studies on SESR focused on enhancing the levels of democratic interaction (Medawar, 1976; Morgan, 1988; Dey, 2003; Gray, 1997; Boyce, 2000; Gray and Bebbington, 2001; Brown, 2009), and most recently, on attempts to create new dialogic accounting practices and technologies that are able to promote stakeholder engagement and interaction at every level (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a, b; Frame and Brown, 2008; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). Thomson and Bebbington (2005) claim that stakeholder engagement is of utmost importance in SESR, arguing that it should

address conflicts among stakeholders, recognise diverse viewpoints, and explicitly manage power dynamics. They maintain that monologic accounting should be replaced by an accounting approach that is able to consider and balance the different perspectives and expectations of the community (Gray *et al.*, 1997).

According to Brown (2009), Brown and Dillard (2013a), and Dillard and Yuthas (2013), many CSR tools over the years have been proposed as a means of promoting democratic interaction (Medawar, 1976; Morgan, 1988; Dey, 2003; Gray, 1997; Boyce, 2000; Gray and Bebbington, 2001). In the last decade these have included attempts to promote explicitly dialogic accounting technologies and forms of engagement (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a, b; Frame and Brown, 2008; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005) that use online social media and social networks. However, the practical results have often been unsatisfactory and not enough progress has been made in terms of the ability to engage multiple perspectives and take into account marginalised voices (Bebbington *et al.*, 2007a; Gray *et al.*, 1997; O'Dwyer, 2005). Stakeholder engagement is conducted in order to attain:

- (1) A deliberative, general consensus (Laughlin 1987, 2007) based on Habermas' (1984, 1987, 1989) "ideal speech situation" – a communication among stakeholders in undistorted conditions that can be built in a "public sphere", "a discursive arena that is home to citizen debate, deliberation, agreement and action" (Villa, 1992, p. 712; Dahlberg, 2005) – on what information and data should be disclosed in the report. When applied to the corporate arena the result of "an open, honest and unbiased ideal speech situation debate among all stakeholders should therefore lead to the acceptance by all stakeholders of a democratically determined consensus view of corporate responsibilities" (Unerman and Bennett, 2004, p. 691).
- (2) A collection of divergent socio-political views in an agonistic perspective, highlighting the unavoidable values and assumptions associated with different accounts and recognising the need for multiple engagements between different actors across various political spaces (Gray, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2005; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b). This perspective involves an understanding of SESR that is much broader than formal organisation-centric reports, and recognises the need for multiple engagements between different actors across various political spaces (Gray, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2005) based on an agonistic model of democratic participation (Brown, 2009; Dillard and Roslender, 2011; Dillard and Brown, 2012; Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b).

In the democratic deliberative approach, stakeholder engagement is necessary for defining the general consensus among diverse stakeholders or inside a specific category. Proponents of the agonistic approach, meanwhile, suggest that stakeholder engagement helps synthesise the different points of views found among diverse groups of interest. In this study, we want to understand whether corporations use social media for conducting stakeholder engagement in SESR, using these internet-based tools as a sort of "public arena" or for recognising the pluralism of diverse ideas and points of view in an agonistic perspective.

According to the extant literature, by 2005 and 2006 accumulation strategies related to the internet had shifted from a primary focus on information to a focus on communication and cooperation (Fuchs, 2008). Some scholars like to designate this transformation as the emergence of "Internet 2.0" or "Web 2.0". The advent of Web 2.0 not only reorganised the way in which companies collected information, but it also redefined stakeholders' expectations. Social media applications, for instance, are creating new features of innovation and improved transparency (Meijer and Thaens, 2010;

Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013) and stakeholders are recognised as partners and co-creators, not just consumers (Chua *et al.*, 2012). These new tools of dialogic communication have opened up new possibilities for organisations to connect with their stakeholders by allowing them to receive real-time feedback about organisational announcements and engage in conversations. Although one-way communication is still the most common form of messaging strategy adopted by organisations on social media (Waters and Jamal, 2011; Xifra and Grau, 2010), attempts to develop interactions among corporations and users are becoming increasingly popular (Rybako and Seltzer, 2010).

Online social media can be defined as “a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). It is an umbrella term describing different types of applications, such as collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs/micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, 2012). In this sense, social media applications are particularly well suited for stakeholder engagement, as the community element embedded within them makes it possible to interact with a large group of people, especially external stakeholders such as customers, NGOs, and local communities.

Of course, dialogic approaches can be criticised due to the practical difficulties in creating the appropriate conditions for success (Power and Laughlin, 1996). Even the most significant difficulties and obstacles associated with dialogic accounting, such as the impracticability of all stakeholders taking part in a dialogue (Power and Laughlin, 1996) or the impossibility to balance divergent stakeholder expectations, can be alleviated, if not solved, using social media. Indeed, social media might contribute to the improvement of accountability systems, providing SESR with the opportunity to significantly change the behaviour of both organisations and stakeholders (Unerman and Bennett, 2004).

At the same time, however, difficulties might emerge in guaranteeing an authentic system of dialogic communication and accounting in an online environment. Dahlberg (2001) summarises these obstacles as follows:

- (1) Discourse tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain users (e.g. excessive posters, dominant voices with higher social status, etc.) and groups. This still happens, though possible solutions (bracketing of identity, development of netiquette, and moderation) have been applied to online dialogue in recent years without substantial success.
- (2) Lack of respectful listening to others and minimal commitment to working with difference, to the detriment of open, fair, and continuous dialogue.
- (3) Difficulties in verifying identity claims and information. As a result, anonymity can seriously affect the reliability of online interactions.
- (4) Despite formal accessibility and rapid expansion of the internet, a large majority of the adult population worldwide still does not have access to online forums. Inclusion in online discourses is inhibited by social inequalities, such as lack of financial resources, poor telecommunications infrastructures, state censorship, or lack of time, cultural capital, or community support.
- (5) The technology employed (e.g. the hardware and software required for internet use) encourages certain forms of online interaction over others. Synchronous

chat-group software and the development of netiquette could be more useful than social media in enhancing and maximising a rational-critical discourse between organisations and their stakeholders (Dahlberg, 2001).

Furthermore, social media could be used as powerful instruments of legitimisation by corporations (Bonsón and Ratkai, 2013) rather than for authentic dialogue and cooperation.

Legitimacy theory suggests that a social contract exists between the company and society (Deegan, 2006; Deegan and Samkin, 2009). This means that an organisation can conduct its activities in a manner that does not necessarily follow its stakeholders' expectations, but is still acceptable by society at large. Thus, organisations can voluntarily report and communicate over social media according to the expectations of society (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Several authors (Suchman, 1995; Garriga and Melé, 2004; Claasen and Roloff, 2011) have linked CSR with notions of legitimacy. According to stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives, organisations opt for SESR in order to reduce their external costs or diminish pressures being imposed by society or regulators (Tate *et al.*, 2010; Caron and Turcotte, 2009; Ballou *et al.*, 2006; Adams, 2002). Scholars who adopt a legitimacy perspective suggest that companies use these instruments of external accountability to influence (or even manipulate) stakeholder perceptions (Patten and Guidry, 2010; Coupland, 2007; Deegan, 2002). Voluntary information is disclosed for strategic reasons rather than on the basis of any perceived responsibilities. Gray *et al.* (1995) claim that some corporations have incentives to improve their social and environmental disclosures, although this does not always positively correlate with their sustainability performance.

When there is a disparity between corporate values and societal values, the organisation can lose its legitimacy within society (Patten, 1992). Voluntary disclosure through SESR and social media can enhance an organisation's legitimacy, elevating its image and perception among various members of society and external stakeholders, especially when using external accountability systems. Even so-called green-washing policies, together with other less opportunistic approaches, belong to a particular type of legitimacy theory subcategory that is known as the socio-economic perspective (Clarkson *et al.*, 2011). Manipulating one's corporate image is easier to accomplish than modifying the company's own levels of sustainability performance, its supply chain structure, or its value system (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975).

However, stakeholder and legitimacy theories can be understood as schools of thought that share some elements in common, since the latter represents a possible evolution, in specific contexts, of the former. Especially when the organisation meets a problem of credibility, it can be led to satisfy priority stakeholders not only because they have the right to be heard by managers (or because these latter have the duty to satisfy their expectations and needs), but also because the organisation needs to improve its image and perception in the society. In this sense, the two theoretical perspectives are not necessarily conflicting or competing with each other, but can be integrated to bring about a better understanding of an organisation's policies and practices of external accountability (see in this perspective: Thorne *et al.*, 2014, p. 701). Legitimacy perspective surely has a more opportunistic orientation compared to stakeholder theory, but it must be considered that even if the organisation does not necessarily follow stakeholder needs, its behaviour must be still acceptable by society at large. In this sense, stakeholder and legitimacy perspectives present a natural match point at the level of strategic understanding of the firm. Thus, a strong orientation towards a strategic or even opportunistic approach to stakeholder theory can suggest accountability and communication as a mechanism for legitimisation in a manner that is socially acceptable.

This has led scholars to question whether social media is used by organisations for legitimising their presence within society and changing their reputation among stakeholders, or rather for creating a system of dialogic – although not necessarily convergent – debate on CSR (Inauen and Schoeneborn, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2013; McLuhan, 1964/1999; Kent, 2013; Reilly and Hynan, 2014).

We hope to add to the literature of social and environmental accounting by determining whether social media can act as reliable instruments of stakeholder engagement, thus contributing to the materiality and relevance of the information that is voluntarily disclosed by corporations in sustainability reports, or whether they are just another mechanism of legitimisation. We believe that the social scientific literature is lacking in terms of the role of social media in fostering a reliable and effective stakeholder engagement in SESR, thereby revealing a gap in knowledge that hinders the development of such studies and their empirical applications.

### 3. Methodology

We studied a sample of 332 sustainability reports in English, Italian, Dutch, and Spanish, all of which were drawn up in accordance with the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines (version 3.1 and 4.0) issued by the GRI (2010, 2013). As of 1 March 2014, we collected all the reports published in 2013 in the GRI online database at the highest levels of accordance with the guidelines:

- (1) for G3.1, levels “A” or “A+”, depending on whether the report was assured or not by a third party; and
- (2) for G4, level “in accordance” (“comprehensive” or “core”, depending on whether indicators related to the material aspects of performance were either all effectively reported or only partially reported).

Although there are other organisations offering SESR guidelines, and this sample is not to be considered representative of all global organisations publishing a SESR, guidelines provided by GRI are one of the most trusted standards for sustainability reporting, as more than 6,000 organisations from more than 60 countries use or have used GRI guidelines to produce their sustainability reports (GRI, 2013).

All the sustainability reports in our sample include a section that discusses the various stakeholder engagement policies and practices implemented by the corporations in the reporting process.

It is important to point out that the corporations in our sample were chosen in order to determine whether the use of social media was disclosed in the stakeholder engagement section. We hypothesised that the use of social media in the sample organisations, which is easily verifiable through content analysis, would emerge when these online interaction tools were actually used. Analysing these sections enables us to answer our exploratory research question, since it is possible to find information on:

- (1) Stakeholder groups engaged by the organisation.
- (2) The basis for identifying and selecting stakeholders with whom to engage. This involves the organisation’s process of defining its stakeholder groups and determining with which groups to engage.
- (3) Approaches to stakeholder engagement, including frequency of engagement by type and by stakeholder group. This could involve surveys, focus groups,



community panels, advisory panels, written communication, management/union structures, and social media.

- (4) Key topics and concerns that have been raised through stakeholder engagement, and how the organisation has responded to them.

The 332 statements we consulted represent a sample of organisations whose characteristics are discussed in detail in the following tables.

Table I shows data concerning all the nationalities of our sampled organisations. The majority of the organisations are from Europe (41 per cent), Asia (27 per cent), and South America (17 per cent). As reported in Table I, we included reports written in six languages: English (76 per cent), Spanish (12 per cent), Portuguese (7 per cent), Italian (2 per cent), German (2 per cent), and Dutch (1 per cent). We opted for these languages because they are among the most widely used, and because they were understood by at least one of the researchers in the team. This led us to discard eleven reports written in other languages, including Korean and Russian.

As reported in Table II, 19 per cent of the sample's organisations are multinational enterprises (MNEs), 74 per cent are large enterprises, and 7 per cent are small or medium enterprises (SMEs). GRI adopts the EU definition for SME, large and multinationals: SME are enterprises with a headcount lower than 250 and a turnover lower than €50 million; large enterprises have more than 250 employees and a turnover greater than €50 million; MNEs must have the same features of Large enterprises, but must also operate in more than one country.

One third of these entities are quoted on their national stock exchange (66 per cent). Table II also shows the list of sectors in which these enterprises operate. The most common sectors are energy and energy utilities (23 per cent) and financial services (14 per cent).

Table III points out that 77 per cent of the sample organisations are private companies, while 9 per cent are state-owned companies. In total, 300 out of 332 reports used GRI – G3.1 standard (239 with level of accordance A+ and 61 with level of accordance A), while the remaining 32 used the newer standard GRI – G4 (28 with level of accordance “core”, four with a “comprehensive” level of accordance).

Previous studies have paid attention to the qualitative properties of information found in sustainability reports regarding stakeholder engagement policies and practices (Manetti, 2011), but in analysing stakeholder engagement disclosure, we want to focus our attention on both references to social media in sustainability reports and their effective use for conducting stakeholder engagement. For this reason, the content analysis was articulated in two steps:

- (1) Manually verify the presence of references to social media (especially Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, and Flickr) in the report in order to understand whether the organisation has effectively used Web 2.0 tools for engaging stakeholders, collecting expectations on the information and data that stakeholders want to know in accordance with principles of materiality and relevance. Reports have been double checked to ensure reliability of the process.
- (2) Using content analysis and tools derived from web analytics and social media analytics (SMA), manually study the Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages of organisations whose reports cited at least one reference to social media in order to verify what type of interaction and dialogue was established among diverse stakeholder categories.

Country	Language of reports						Total	%	Use of social media for engaging stakeholders
	English	Italian	Dutch	Portuguese	Spanish	German			
Andorra					1		1	0.3	<b>993</b>
Argentina	1				2		3	0.9	
Australia	17						17	5.1	
Austria	2					2	4	1.2	
Bolivia					1		1	0.3	
Brazil	8			19			27	8.1	
Canada	8						8	2.4	
Chile	2				2		4	1.2	
China	3						3	0.9	
Colombia	2				8		10	3.0	
Ecuador					3		3	0.9	
Finland	5						5	1.5	
France	4						4	1.2	
Germany	12					4	16	4.8	
Greece	2						2	0.6	
India	17						17	5.1	
Indonesia	1						1	0.3	
Israel	3						3	0.9	
Italy	11	8					19	5.7	
Jordan	3						3	0.9	
Korea	25						25	7.5	
Luxembourg	2						2	0.6	
Mexico	3				4		7	2.1	
The Netherlands	10		3				13	3.9	
Norway	1						1	0.3	
Pakistan	2						2	0.6	
Peru	1				2		3	0.9	
Philippines	3						3	0.9	
Poland	3						3	0.9	
Portugal	7			3			10	3.0	
Qatar	5						5	1.5	
Romania	1						1	0.3	
Russian Federation	10						10	3.0	
Singapore	3						3	0.9	
South Africa	4						4	1.2	
Spain	10				17		27	8.1	
Sri Lanka	1						1	0.3	
Sweden	1						1	0.3	
Switzerland	5					1	6	1.8	
Taiwan	3						3	0.9	
Thailand	3						3	0.9	
Turkey	5						5	1.5	
United Arab Emirates	4						4	1.2	
UK	11						11	3.3	
USA	20						20	6.0	
Hong Kong	8						8	2.4	
Total	252	8	3	22	40	7	332	100	<b>Table I.</b> Nationality of sampled organisations and language of reports
%	75.90	2.41	0.90	6.63	12.05	2.11	100		

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**Table II.**  
Sectors and size of  
organisations

Sector	Size of organisations			Total	%
	Large	MNE	SME		
Agriculture	1			1	0.30
Automotive	7	1		8	2.41
Aviation	6			6	1.81
Chemicals	13	1		14	4.22
Commercial services	5	2	3	10	3.01
Computers	1	3		4	1.20
Conglomerates	4	1		5	1.51
Construction	9	2		11	3.31
Construction materials	6	3	1	10	3.01
Energy	40	7	2	49	14.76
Energy utilities	25	2	1	28	8.43
Equipment	1	1		2	0.60
Financial services	37	7	1	45	13.55
Food and beverage products	8	3		11	3.31
Forest and paper products	5	1		6	1.81
Healthcare products	1	4	1	6	1.81
Healthcare services	2			2	0.60
Household and personal products	3			3	0.90
Logistics	4	2		6	1.81
Media			1	1	0.30
Metals products	4	1	1	6	1.81
Mining	11	2		13	3.92
Non-profit/services	1		2	3	0.90
Other	8	5	2	15	4.52
Public agency	8		2	10	3.01
Railroad	4			4	1.20
Real estate	8	2		10	3.01
Retailers	2	3		5	1.51
Technology hardware	4	5		9	2.71
Telecommunications	7	2		9	2.71
Textiles and apparel	2			2	0.60
Tourism/leisure		2	2	4	1.20
Universities	3			3	0.90
Waste management	1	1	2	4	1.20
Water utilities	6		1	7	2.11
Total	247	63	22	332	100
%	74.40	18.98	6.63	100	

**Table III.**  
Classification of  
organisation type  
and GRI standard  
used in reports

Type	GRI standard		Total	%
	GRI – G3.1	GRI – G4		
Cooperative	3		3	0.90
Non-profit organisation	2	1	3	0.90
Partnership	5	1	6	1.81
Private company	228	25	253	76.20
Public institution	12	4	16	4.82
State-owned company	32		32	9.64
Subsidiary	18	1	19	5.72
Total	300	32	332	100
%	90.36	9.64	100	

SMA is the practice of gathering and analysing data from blogs and social media websites in order to make business decisions. SMA appears as an emerging interdisciplinary methodology that aims to combine, extend, and adapt methods for analysis of social media data (Stieglitz *et al.*, 2014; Bekmamedova *et al.*, 2014). SMA involves measuring, analysing, and interpreting interactions and associations between people, topics, and ideas. SMA is a powerful tool for uncovering stakeholder sentiment dispersed across countless online sources. This analysis is often called “social media listening”, as the analytics allow marketers to identify sentiment and identify trends in order to better meet their customers’ needs. Many companies have used these types of analytic tools to engage customers, local communities, and NGOs.

While SMA represents a fairly recent approach to the study of online interaction among organisations and their stakeholders (especially customers), content analysis is a widely adopted analytic tool in corporate disclosure studies (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004) because it allows repeatability and valid inferences from data according to their context (Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis is a summarizing process, a quantitative analysis of messages that relies on social scientific methods and is not limited to measurable variables or to the context in which the messages are created or presented (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 10). In other words, content analysis is a scholarly methodology within the social sciences and humanities in which texts are studied in order to determine authorship, authenticity, or meaning. It is conceived as a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of certain types of messages (Holsti, 1969).

In the first step of our survey we decided to verify the presence or absence of references to social media in the reports of our samples. We then analysed Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, and Flickr in order to determine the corporations that declared in their reports the use of these social media sites for engaging or consulting with stakeholders. This second type of analysis was aimed at studying the type of interaction that exists within a specific period of time between the organisation and its stakeholders through social media, using both SMA and content analysis. We studied posts, tweets, and videos published between 1 March 2014 and 31 May 2014. We focused on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, as the results of the first phase confirmed that they were the most relevant forms of social media used by the organisations in our study.

Our approach allowed us to easily verify the presence or absence of the various elements that often characterize the use of social media as a means of conducting stakeholder engagement. In almost all of the items, the content analysis consisted of a search for keywords as well as attempts to tabulate the length of the text and the number of sentences dedicated to specific topics. We also determined the frequency of specific words related to the use of social media.

The research team was composed of eight people: an academic supervisor, a coordinator of the content analysis, and six master level students with specific proficiency in the languages used by the sample organisations. Some tests of the coding procedure were conducted to highlight ambiguous or unclear interpretation of coding rules. Six pages of reports of as many organisations for each social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) were independently examined by each member of the research group. The results were compared and differences of interpretation discussed. Except in the case that the researcher was mother tongue or expert in that specific language, pages have been double checked to ensure reliability of the process. This resulted in a final set of detection and classification rules for information

contained in the documents. Finally, another page for each social media – this time by the whole group – to align the conduct of all research team members. The next step was to divide social media pages for content analysis among team members, dividing the workload in such a way as to ensure that each member had a chance to analyse reports from a wide variety of organisation, taking into account type, dimensions, and sector. Afterwards, the supervisor and the coordinator compared the results obtained by the other members, checking that there were no differences of interpretation. All in all, we obtained a Cohen's  $\kappa$  coefficient of inter-reliability of 0.8.

For Facebook, the unit of data collection consists of each post generated by the organisation on its official page. In the case of Twitter, the unit of data collection consists of each tweet generated by the organisation, whether original content or a rebroadcasting of content from another account (a retweet). For YouTube, the unit consists of each video posted by the organisation on its official channel.

We assessed the number of “likes” each unit generated on Facebook. “Likes” represent user engagement, and accumulate when the audience presses the “like” button, a feature available for each individual post and its comments (Ramanadhan *et al.*, 2013). We also assessed the number of favourites and retweets each unit collected on Twitter. For YouTube, we tracked the number of comments each unit generated.

In addition to analysing single tweets/posts/videos, we also collected data for the accounts of organisations, such as “page likes” for Facebook pages, the number of “followers” for Twitter accounts, and the number “subscribers” to the organisation's YouTube channel. This data are relevant because it measures the extent to which social media users engage with the organisations in our study. This data were accumulated by adopting a manual procedure, one that enabled us to study each account unit by unit in order to carefully retrieve quantitative data (the number of posts in a certain period) and qualitative data (which posts are about SESR). Although web software can be used to count the total number of posts in a certain period, we opted for a manual approach because we wanted to carefully assess which posts touched upon topics relating to SESR/CSR.

The research team followed Carroll and Buchholtz's (2000, p. 35) definition of CSR: “corporate social responsibility encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic expectations placed on organisations by society at a given point in time”. This definition is based on Carroll's four-part model of CSR, also known as “Carroll's pyramid of CSR”, which was initially proposed by Carroll (1991), refined in later publications (Carroll, 1991; Carroll, 1979; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2000), and is one of the most established and accepted models of CSR (Crane and Matten, 2004). According to Carroll (1991), the satisfaction of economic responsibilities towards shareholders, employees, consumers, suppliers, etc. is the first layer of CSR – the base of the pyramid – and is a requirement for all organisations. A second layer is also required by society, as corporations seeking to be socially responsible must abide by the law. The third layer of ethical responsibility obliges corporations to do what is right, just, and fair, even when they are not compelled to do so by the legal system. In other words, ethical responsibilities consist of what is generally expected by society over and above economic and legal requirements (Carroll, 1991). Lastly, the fourth level of CSR – the tip of the pyramid – looks at the philanthropic responsibilities that are not expected or required from corporations, making them less important than the other three categories (Crane and Matten, 2004).

The team discussed and agreed on the best criteria for highlighting a post/tweet/video about CSR or stakeholder engagement, developing practical guidelines to analyse and

select contributions relevant to our research objective. For instance, CSR contributions involve all elements of economic, legal, and ethical responsibility that have a positive impact on its stakeholders, including any tweets/posts/videos dealing with the activities or practices concerning the inclusion of a social and environmental focus in business processes, attempts to address the social or environmental impact of the company, or anything that can help to make it more sustainable, useful, ethical, or transparent (e.g. collaboration with non-profit and third sector organisations). Guidelines discussed by the research team also included a list of relevant keywords that were deemed useful while performing the content analysis, including CSR, social, environment, responsibility, value, stakeholders, sustainability, employees, suppliers, customers, community, needs, impact, health, education, philanthropy, non-profit, donations, accountability, standard, ethic, legal, philanthropy, triple bottom line, and engagement.

In terms of stakeholder engagement, the team agreed that the stakeholder list would include: shareholders/investors; employees, suppliers, customers and users; state and public administration; third sector organisations and NGOs; and community/general interest.

#### 4. Results

This section presents the results of our content analysis for each type of social media.

##### 4.1 Stakeholder engagement through Twitter

Out of a total of 332 reports, 74 reports (22.29 per cent) cited the official Twitter account of the organisation as a channel through which to interact with stakeholders. Since two accounts were not accessible during our research, the content analysis is based on 72 official Twitter accounts (21.69 per cent).

On average, these official Twitter profiles accounted for 72,997 followers, 1,613 followings (number of other Twitter profiles they follow), and 5,915 total messages (from the creation of the account). Accordingly, the average size of these accounts is fairly large in terms of internet traffic.

By using the word “tweets” we mean both tweets (short messages no longer than 140 characters) and retweets (sharing of other users’ tweets). During the period of our analysis – from 1 March to 31 May 2014 – these accounts produced an average total number of 490 tweets, an average of 35 messages (7.09 per cent) concerning CSR topics, and only one tweet (only 0.22 per cent of messages) about stakeholder engagement.

In total, 30 of the organisations mentioned above produced at least one tweet on their official Twitter accounts that contributed to stakeholder engagement for sustainability reporting. Of this sub-set of entities, 17 are large organisations (57 per cent), ten are multinationals (33 per cent), and three are SMEs (10 per cent). In total, 73 per cent of these 30 organisations are private companies, while 10 per cent are state-owned companies. In all, 27 per cent are in the energy and energy utilities sector, while 10 per cent are in the financial services.

If we consider only these organisations, the percentage of tweets concerning CSR activities rises from 7.09 to 8.94 per cent. On average, each of these organisations produced three tweets (0.50 per cent of the total tweets) that engaged stakeholders during the period of our analysis.

Table IV presents a selection of noteworthy tweets concerning stakeholder engagement that were posted from these organisations during the period of our research. The name and the URLs of the company have been omitted.

No. Tweet	No. of retweets	No. of favourites	Class of engaged stakeholder
1. We want to hear from you. What do you want to know about @———'s CSR efforts? Sustainable packaging? Volunteer efforts? Tell us	1	0	Community/general, customers
2. We want your input! How do you reduce waste in your home? <a href="http://reduce.org">http://reduce.org</a> Share your tips	0	0	Community/general, customers
3. What is your company doing to mitigate climate risk? Join us and sign the #ClimateDeclaration today!	1	0	Suppliers, employees, community, customers
4. Excited to announce our new programme, #PowerYourVoice, w/ the @UNDP, @unfoundation, @———, & @aPldeap tomorrow at the #PovertyMatch!	7	2	Community/general
5. "A healthy employee, an effective employee" Tomorrow all the details at 09:30 on #ImpulsandoPymesTENERIFE <sup>a</sup>	2	2	Community/general, employees
6. Who participated in our #MOOC on #Sustainability yesterday? How was the first class? We'd love to hear your feedback #———	4	2	Community/general, consumers
7. Do you want to increase employee engagement? Here are 6 tips to help you do just that – <a href="http://———">http://———</a>	8	2	Employees
8. What do you think makes a good investment? We asked. You answered. Here's what you said..... <a href="http://www.australianethical.com.au/news/what-do-you-think-makes-good-investment">http://www.australianethical.com.au/news/what-do-you-think-makes-good-investment</a> ... #GoodMoney	0	0	Community/general, investors
9. What is more important now: increasing energy efficiency or developing more renewables? Share your thoughts with us	4	2	Community/general
10. Have an idea for a social enterprise? Come to @secatalyst's Day of Learning on May 30 in #VictoriaBC: <a href="http://———">http://———</a> #socent	0	0	Community/general

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Original tweet in Spanish. Hashtags have been not translated

**Table IV.**  
Excerpts for relevant tweets concerning stakeholder engagement (Twitter)

Considering our research goal, it was important to study if online interaction through social media represents an effective stakeholder engagement mechanism in SESR. The study of each relevant tweet suggests that Twitter is also effectively used by companies and other organisations to disseminate their CSR activities. However, these organisations rarely use Twitter to engage with stakeholders. Indeed, our findings suggest that this type of interaction is rare, as very little social media content involves sustainability reporting from stakeholders. Twitter, for instance, is used primarily to mono-directionally promote the organisation's activities (also those concerning CSR), services, and products without engaging stakeholders for sustainability reporting. This could suggest that Twitter is mainly used by organisations as a means of legitimising their presence within society rather than creating a system of dialogic interaction.

We also determined that messages written with the aim of interacting with stakeholders are usually not targeted towards a specific category of stakeholders and can be classified as communication towards the community in general.

#### 4.2 Stakeholder engagement through Facebook

Facebook is found to be the most widely used social network site among the organisations in our sample: 97 reports (29.22 per cent) cited the official Facebook page of the organisation as a channel through which to engage stakeholders. In all, 16 pages were either inactive or unavailable, which means that that we performed content analysis on 73 official Facebook pages (21.99 per cent). On average, each of these pages reported 731,298 likes and 12,938 citations on Facebook. As in the case of Twitter, it is not surprising to find that many of these organisations preside over fairly large accounts that can reach a substantial number of people.

During the period of our analysis, these pages published, on average, 47 posts, eight messages concerning CSR topics, and 1 post about stakeholder engagement. On average, 17.36 per cent of messages dealt with a CSR activity and just 1.42 per cent of messages contributed to stakeholder engagement for sustainability reporting.

We determined that 12 of these organisations produced at least one post on their official Facebook pages that tried to contribute to stakeholder engagement for sustainability reporting. In total, 11 are large organisations and one is an SME. It appears that no multinationals are using Facebook to engage stakeholders for sustainability reporting. Six organisations are private companies, two are public institutions, two are non-profit organisations, and two are subsidiaries. There is not a clearly prevalent industry sector for this set of 12 organisations that tried to engage stakeholders.

If we consider only these organisations, the percentage of posts concerning CSR activities rises from 17.36 to 26.12 per cent. This means that the latter organisations publish a post on CSR at a rate of one out of every four posts. On average, each of these organisations produced four posts (7.36 per cent of the total posts) that tried to engage stakeholders during the period of our analysis. Table V presents a selection of relevant posts concerning stakeholder engagement that were published by these organisations during the period of our research. The name and the URLs of the company have been omitted.

Although Facebook, like Twitter, was used more for promoting CSR activities than for engaging stakeholders, it is possible to detect a greater effort by organisations in exploiting Facebook as a means of dialogic interaction. The organisations that published at least one post with the aim of engaging stakeholders published stakeholder engagement posts 7.36 per cent of the time, while the same analysis on Twitter showed a much lower rate of 0.50 per cent.

As Table V illustrates, the level of interaction on Facebook is higher than on Twitter, with greater levels of commenting, liking, and sharing. This is probably because of the social networking nature of the former and the microblog characteristics of the latter. Table V also shows whether comments to posts contained at least one reply from the organisation itself. For instance, in post no. 4 and 6 the organisation replied with more details on the location of the project and thanked the users for their contributions.

The level of interaction of the overall sample is certainly low, but there are some significant exceptions among the organisations. For instance, we examined why some posts led to a particularly high number of comments. We found that this usually happens with posts on social or ethically sensitive topics, such as the use of renewable resources or resources that need to be collected in areas at risk of war or civil uprisings. It appears that organised groups of users can mobilise against certain behaviours they believe to be wrong, right, or disingenuous (e.g. a protest against green washing), adding negative comments to an organisation's Facebook page. This type of protest



No.	Post	No. of likes	No. of comments	No. of sharing	Class of engaged stakeholder	Response by org.
1.	Can you move like a fish in the water on social networks? Are you a strong advocate of environment and ecology? If your answer is yes, do you want to become our environmental community manager for 6 months? Find out how <a href="#">http://_____a</a>	34	3	2	Community/ general, employees	No
2.	At _____ we want to know what do you think about the recycling of used oil in order to improve it in any way we can. Can you help us answering this simple survey? <a href="#">http://_____a</a>	18	0	0	Community/ general	-
3.	"We support start-ups with a difference, businesses that make a difference in the lives of the underprivileged"_____. Apply today at: <a href="#">http://_____</a>	5	1		Community/ general, investors	No
4.	We are not only helping our customers to save energy; we are also making ourselves more energy efficient <a href="#">http://_____</a>	1541	36	137	Community/ general, consumers	Yes
5.	Caring for #MedioAmbiente is vital and that's why we do it everyday. Log in to find out everything. How do you contribute to care for the #planeta? <a href="#">http://_____a</a>	1	0	0	Community/ general	-
6.	As we should take care of our #planeta, we carry out "VISION 2015" encouraging #sustentabilidad in our processes and products. How do you help? #RSE <sup>a</sup>	14	6	0	Community/ general	Yes
7.	We have been asking you to have your say, here's what some colleagues, members and customers had to say on the subject of community: <a href="#">http://_____</a> Make your opinion count and have your say _____	0	0	0	Employees, consumers	-
8.	Environmental pollution is one of the great issues of our time. In fact, it is so harmful that WHO has estimated that kills 7 million people each year. Collaborate with _____. Together we can build a better and more sustainable world <sup>a</sup>	0	0	23	Community/ general, investors	-
9.	India is waking to a green future. Indian Government is gearing up to provide _____ subsidies for promoting sales of electric vehicles: <a href="#">http://_____</a>	35	0	1	Community/ general, public	-
10.	Sometimes when you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself. Seeking entrepreneurs who can make a difference. Are you one of them? <a href="#">http://_____</a>	19	0	0	Community/ general, investors	-
11.	Calling all _____ clients! Have you participated in our client survey? It's fast and helps us help you! The survey will be open until Friday, April 4th @ 5:00 p.m.	0	0	0	Consumers	-

**Table V.**  
Excerpts for relevant posts concerning stakeholder engagement (Facebook)

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>Original post in Spanish. Hashtags have been not translated

has an impact on the behaviour and performances of the company, but is beyond the scope of this study. Overall, we can affirm that, although the mean level of interaction is low (indicating a scarce tendency to dialogic accounting and interaction), the research has highlighted some significant exceptions in which the level of interaction is high or very high. This points towards a sort of “polylogic accounting system” (Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b) in which stakeholders communicate with both each other and the organisation itself, delineating a model of interactive relations that aims at bringing about divergent or convergent deliberations.

Table VI shows a transcript of a Facebook post presenting several “likes” and positive comments that could suggest a convergent, “Habermasian” tendency; Table VII shows an example of a post with many negative and critical comments that indicate a more agonistic and divergent attitude between users and the organisation (comments are reported as they are, including typos, but user identities and profile pictures have been blurred for anonymity).

The two examples show a high level of interaction between both users and organisation and among users as a group. This high interaction through the social network enables organisations to better understand which are the main relevant topics they need to cover in their reports (in addition to the contents and the way of conveying these topics), in accordance with the principle of materiality and relevance of information disclosed (Unerman and Bennett, 2004; GRI, 2013). In this sense, it appears that Facebook is used, if only in a few cases, as an effective mechanism of stakeholder engagement in SESR. This leads us to a partially positive answer to our exploratory research question.

*Post*

Multinational in the oil-and-gas sector

May 2014 [Post’s privacy set to “public”]

We are not only helping our customers to save energy; we are also making ourselves more energy efficient [Link]

[Image of an offshore oil platform]

[1,620 likes] [36 comments] [168 shares]

Examples of comment

Beautiful where is pacific or Atlantic ocean?

[1 like]

Replies by the company

[Username], this is in the

Gulf of Mexico

[4 likes]

Replies by other users

Somebody noticed the

rainbow in this picture?

[0 likes]

When we refine our resources we will be better off all together [8 likes] –

One of the largest companies in the world [happy emoticon] amazing [5 likes] –

You have made a lot of fortune from Nigeria and in return, polluted our waters without efforts geared towards cleansing them [4 likes] –

People keep asking for cheaper gasoline, but don’t think about how much more it’s costing to make, as regulations and societal expectations increase. –

Being more energy efficient, working our hardest to keep people and the environment safe, and pulling more difficult oil out of the ground isn’t free or cheap [2 likes]

I did luv 2 work in shell some day [2 likes] –

**Table VI.**  
Transcript of a Facebook post presenting a convergent interaction

AAAJ  
29,6

1002

*Post*

Multinational in the IT sector

April 2014 [Post's privacy set to "public"]

All gold, tantalum, tin, and tungsten inside our microprocessors is now "Conflict-free". Learn more:

[Link]

[Image of a hand grabbing small rocks and metal nuggets]

[2,957 likes] [61 comments] [166 shares]

Examples of comment

Replies by  
the company

Replies by other users

Because you said it's conflict free [31 likes] –

It would be stupid for [organisation] to release such a statement if it weren't true. I'm not saying that there isn't a possibility of it being false but think about it [5 likes] Yeah, somebody could sue them for false advertising [1 like]

That probably means all their ties to their resources for creating the components are valid, and have been possibly checked on some moral standard they appeal.? [0 likes] There was no conflict in negotiation deals with a third party the first party is dead but that was not there transaction [unsure emoticon] [0 likes]

In reality I am sure it means they contacted mines directly and don't use vendors who buy from other people. [0 likes] Is that the reason for high prices? [1 like] What u meas [0 likes]

It wasn't before? [confused emoticon] – [38 likes]

Blood processors!!!! [8 likes] –

It's a shame it took this long and you could not think about this by yourself untill public pressure adn pressure from human rights groups. That say's to me you don't care at all. You only care about public opinion. It's not out of your own good intentions. Otherwise there would never have been conflict metals and such. So don't act like this is something special and good. This is how it should have been from the start [5 likes]

Wait.... That means that's was not before???? [3 likes] –

You own electronics. Every one of those electronics has conflict material in them. If you bought electronics, you are – to scale – equally as bad [0 likes] I know i am equally bad. But after i finally do the right thing i'm not going to scream it off the roofs so that people can see how good i am. Acting like i finally came to that realisation after all those years [0 likes]

Maybe yes, maybe no. With sourcing gold and tantalum, it's hard to know if it is conflict free or isn't. I think now what intel are doing is just making sure, most companies now that the UN are spending billions to stop illegal precious metal trade [2 likes]

**Table VII.**

Transcript of a Facebook post presenting a high level of divergent interaction

Furthermore, like Twitter, most interaction-oriented contributions on Facebook are not targeted towards a specific category of stakeholders and often address the community in general.

Lastly, the language used by organisations on Twitter and Facebook is often quite informal, featuring short sentences, common words, and shortcuts of internet lexicon.

This is because people are more likely to communicate through both “word-of-mouth” and social media when they are engaged with specific products or services (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011): this engagement may come naturally for supporters of particular causes or products, but it can also be creatively stimulated using an appropriate language for issues relating to CSR and sustainability, which often generate less psychological involvement among users (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

#### 4.3 Stakeholder engagement through YouTube

YouTube is a media channel that is quite different from Twitter and Facebook. Whereas Twitter contributions usually consist of short messages and links, and Facebook posts usually consist of texts, videos, photos, or links, YouTube contributions are restricted solely to posting videos. Interaction with stakeholders can be delineated by examining the comments that have been posted on videos that have been uploaded by the organisation on its official YouTube Channel. Totally, 33 sustainability reports (9.94 per cent of our sample) cited the official YouTube channel of the organisation. This is a much lower percentage than organisations who relied on Twitter (22.29 per cent) and Facebook (29.22 per cent), which in turn suggests that YouTube is the least popular form of social media among the organisations in our study. This is probably because the process of conceiving, recording, editing, and publishing videos requires more resources than managing a Facebook Page or a Twitter account, and because the level of interaction is usually lower in comparison to other types of social media.

Since four accounts were unavailable, we performed content analysis on 29 official YouTube channels (8.73 per cent) belonging to 22 large organisations, two SMEs, and five MNEs. The majority of these organisations are private companies (23); there are two non-profit organisations, two public institutions, one cooperative, and one subsidiary. In total, 19 companies are listed on their national stock exchange. Each of these channels accounted for a notable amount of traffic: we assessed 7,720,108 page views, 390 uploaded videos, and 7,052 subscribers (users who opted to receive updates and notifications about new videos uploaded on a given channel).

During the period of our analysis, these channels published an average of 17.14 clips, an average of 2.28 videos concerning CSR topics, and 0.03 videos about stakeholder engagement. Although the percentage of videos on CSR is significant (13.28 per cent), hardly any videos with the aim of engaging stakeholders for sustainability reporting have been found (0.20 per cent). YouTube is not considered a media platform in which to interact with company stakeholders for sustainability reporting, but rather as a platform in which to mono-directionally showcase activities, products, and services. This is also confirmed by the fact that some accounts disabled the commenting system, which is probably due to a fear of negative feedback.

At the same time, however, it is relevant to point out that we assessed a high percentage of videos (13.28 per cent) that focus on the social and environmental commitment of the organisations in our study, oftentimes showcasing projects, joint ventures, collaborations, and services with a social or environmental impact. This is probably due to the suitability of videos to effectively disseminate this kind of content. In this sense, YouTube appears to be more an instrument of monologic communication – although sometimes oriented to sustainability issues and problems – rather an authentic dialogic and interaction channel of communication.

## 5. Conclusions

In this study we assessed if online interaction through social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, represents an effective stakeholder engagement mechanism in order to define the contents of SESR. We think this is an increasingly relevant topic, as social media is becoming one of the main channels through which organisations promote their activities and communicate with customers, users, communities, and other primary stakeholders. Moreover, within an interdisciplinary accounting research perspective, our study aims to explore the link between accounting and social media since, as corporations and markets increasingly become mediatised, issues of accountability become more prominent and prevalent (Jeacle and Carter, 2014).

In the process of answering our exploratory research question we ran a two-step analysis. First, we analysed a sample of 332 sustainability reports to verify the presence of references to social media (placing special emphasis on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google+, and Flickr) or a disclosure in the stakeholder engagement section on the use of social media. This was done in order to understand whether the organisation has effectively declared its intent to use these online tools for engaging stakeholders.

We then observed and analysed the social media pages of organisations that declared in their reports that they use these tools for interacting with their stakeholders. This was done in order to study the type of interaction that exists between the organisation and its stakeholders through social media, using both SMA and content analysis.

We believe our study produced at least two significant results. First, we have determined whether (and to what extent) organisations are effectively using social media for engaging stakeholders. Our analysis, in fact, suggests that only a small number of organisations use social media to engage stakeholders as a means of defining the contents of sustainability reports. Our results show that using social media for interacting with stakeholders, retrieving their opinions, and collecting data for SESR is not yet a common practice among organisations that publish GRI reports. It seems that the use of social media for one-way communication to users (especially customers) and for legitimising the presence of the organisation within society is a strong and consolidated tendency. However, we did find a higher level of online interaction with the “community” with reference to more broadly understood CSR topics that are not specifically connected with SESR policies and practices.

Second, our analysis of the social media pages enabled us to understand which kind of dialogue between organisations and stakeholders is actually performed: the level of interaction (measured as comments/replies, liking/starring, and sharing/retweeting, depending on the social network) is generally very low with the exception of posts on Facebook that sometimes result in effective means of dialogue among various parties. However, the use of a Facebook profile for interacting with the community is more often oriented towards a dialogue on CSR topics than to the definition of SESR contents. We observed, in particular, several posts concerning very critical topics (e.g. the use of renewable resources or the collection of resources in areas at risk of war) where a high amount of negative feedback is produced. Accordingly, this type of interaction is more oriented more towards gathering divergent socio-political views in an agonistic perspective (Brown and Dillard, 2013a, b) than to adopting a deliberative approach aimed at forging a democratic consensus on how to address specific CSR or SESR issues and problems (Unerman and Bennett, 2004, p. 691). In these cases we can affirm that the tendency of organisations to use social media for legitimising their

presence in society (Deegan, 2006) is still strong, but the interaction that arises from the initial posts on CSR topics is associated with agonist accounting. Indeed, it is not unusual to find cases where the initial post by the organisation generates a conversation that could be potentially damaging to the organisation's image, since the company is criticised for its activities, for the services or products provided, or for the way in which socially – or environmentally – sensitive issues are managed. The “tone” and the contents of the replies are unpredictable and, given the nature of social media, hard to manage by the organisation.

Facebook, in particular, seems to be utilised as a vehicle for synthesising the different points of views found among diverse groups of interest and for recognising elements of difference, antagonism, and divergent socio-political orientations within the community of online users. As such, organisations should take these views into account. Regardless, the level of interaction between the organisation and its stakeholders on these topics is not particularly high and communication, after an initial push towards a two-way conversation, assumes unidirectional tones because organisations tend not to respond to the comments or provocations of Facebook users.

We also determined that messages posted with the aim of interacting with users are not usually targeted towards a specific category of stakeholders, but rather towards the community in general. Social media sites are still used mainly as mono-directional channels for promoting products, services, and activities, rather than as platforms in which to interact with stakeholders and gather relevant data for sustainability reporting.

In conclusion, social media can be used by corporations, public agencies, and non-profit organisations to give voice to their stakeholders with reference to SESR or to CSR topics, but without necessarily providing people an effective say in the decision-making process (Fuchs, 2009). Stakeholders can communicate their ideas, but in their everyday life they do not necessarily have transformative institutionalized power over organisations. As a result, the main risk of social media use for stakeholder engagement in SESR is to give the illusion that stakeholders can make a difference, whereas in reality they do not often influence policies. On the contrary, the recourse to social media for this type of involvement can contribute to the building of an illusory mechanism of democratic decision-making process in SESR. However, in accordance with the principle of materiality and relevance of information disclosed (Unerman and Bennett, 2004; GRI, 2013), the different levels of interaction among different topics enable organisations, although in a few cases, to better define the main relevant topics – in addition to the contents and the communication mode of such topics – they need to cover in their reports.

In light of these considerations, our research points towards the necessity of determining whether online mobilisation through social media induces social self-expression, information gathering, and real changes of opinions among stakeholders as it does in the area of politics (Bond *et al.*, 2012). There is evidence that online mobilisation works in changing political opinions because it is spread primarily through strong-tie networks that often exist offline, but have also established an online presence. These findings suggest that online messages might influence a variety of offline behaviours, which have implications for our understanding of the role of social media in society (Bond *et al.*, 2012). By adopting a similar approach, contemporary scholars might consider studying how organisations plan, build, and organise their online interactive networks and media in order to engage stakeholders for answering their CSR and SESR issues.

Furthermore, this study does not use statistical models or automatic content analysis software. In fact, we used a fully manual, qualitative approach. From a quantitative perspective, it could be interesting to analyse the possible correlations between organisation types/sectors and their preferred type of social media platform. From a qualitative perspective, however, further research could examine how comments by users are used by organisations, how discourses are being deployed, utilised and reconstructed, and their effect on the activities of the organisation itself.

Moreover, future research might examine the best features of social media in terms of engaging stakeholders in SESR and the corresponding impacts on an organisation's economic, social, and environmental performance. This prospective development could allow us to better understand what types of organisations are more likely to engage in a two-way conversation with their stakeholders in order to define the contents of SESR.

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