The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility

Edited by Øyvind Ihlen, Jennifer L. Bartlett, and Steve May

While there is a huge amount of literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), there is relatively little advice to be found regarding how CSR should be communicated. This book represents a definitive research collection for CSR communications, taking stock of the existing recommendations and demonstrating how the communication disciplines can make contributions to central research gaps in the CSR literature.

Contributions from leading scholars in public relations, organizational communication, reputation management, marketing, and management show how theories of discourse, internal communication, cognitive psychology, reputation, and rhetoric enrich our understanding of CSR communication and how this influences the way organizations should be managed.

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Charles Conrad, Texas A&M University

“This volume advances CSR research in two ways: the editors challenged the authors to confront its constituent paradoxes and the respondents offered compelling critiques of the chapters in those terms.”

Stan Deetz, University of Colorado, Boulder

“An impressive, accessible volume including writings by a significant group of international scholars and practitioners. CSR communication is clearly and usefully delineated in relation to the full array of traditional organization studies.”

David McKie, University of Waikato

“A handbook marks a significant moment in the development of a field. Ihlen, Bartlett, and May have done justice to that moment with a well-organized and stimulating synthesis that provides a sound foundation for future CSR studies.”

Anne Gregory, Leeds Metropolitan University

“The most comprehensive book on CSR communication yet. The editors have indeed provided ‘the definitive collection for CSR communication’ drawn from an outstanding team of international and cross-disciplinary contributors.”

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Øyvind Ihlen, Jennifer L. Bartlett, and Steve May
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Sitting on three different continents makes it fairly safe to say that work on this book has been conducted around the clock. Since spring 2009 when the idea was first launched, we have been attempting to put together the definitive collection on corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Our basic interest, which we discussed while meeting on the conference circuit, was to pull together insights from the communication disciplines on how to approach CSR. It was an area we felt was not adequately and methodically dealt with in the vast array of CSR literature in which we were mutually immersed. This book, as other authors would have noted, both satisfied our initial desires and opened up a world of new questions and lines of enquiry to pursue.

A project such as a relatively weighty edited volume is, of course, more than just a single line of thought. The varied interests and insights of our contributors have created a synergy around our initial questions. We would like to thank all the contributors who have enthusiastically responded to our invitations and feedback, and graciously shared their views on the chosen subjects. This volume would, of course, not be the same without you.

We would also like to thank senior editor, Elizabeth P. Swayze and her team at Wiley-Blackwell, for a very pleasant and speedy production process. Elizabeth shared our vision for the potential contribution of this volume to both the communication and management disciplines.

We also have thanks for the attention to detail of our research assistants – Fiona Schrier and Anahita Yousefi – who helped out and tackled style issues on opposite sides of the world.

Øyvind thanks his partner Hilde for her constant cheerleading and relentless support, and their sunshine and soon-to-be big sister, Ina. Working life has to take a backseat faced with a three-year-old’s invitation of “let’s play around and be silly daddy!”

Jennifer thanks her wonderful husband Bren who keeps her grounded and her darling children Bru, Mardi and George who continue to delight and amaze her. And of course to Edwyn who is by her side through it all!
Steve thanks Geriel for her generous spirit of inquiry and critique that has shaped all of his work. He also thanks Arcadia for her enduring passion and joy and for her ability to find wonder in so many realms of life, both great and small.

And ultimately, we hope this book contributes to the thinking and aspirations of those people who believe in corporate social responsibility as part of the way that businesses operate in society and are working daily to turn ideas into reality.

Øyvind Ihlen, Jennifer L. Bartlett and Steve May
Part I

Introduction
Corporate Social Responsibility and Communication

Øyvind Ihlen, Jennifer L. Bartlett and Steve May

Corporate activities are increasingly scrutinized for their effect on society and the environment. It is unthinkable that a corporation today will declare publicly that its only goal is to make money for its shareholders. Instead, corporations typically claim to balance the needs of society and the environment against the need to make a profit. That is, corporations say they practice corporate social responsibility (CSR). This edited volume explores the complexities of this seemingly simple claim. As such it is an essential resource to complement the latest academic thinking from management and communication research on how corporations communicate about CSR. This chapter presents an overview of the book.

While there is a huge literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), the literature on CSR communication is disproportionate in size, with relatively little cross-disciplinary research on the topic. This book aims to be the definitive research collection for CSR communication by pulling together and expanding on existing recommendations from the management discipline and from communication disciplines such as public relations, organizational communication, marketing, and reputation management. Scholars from all these disciplines contribute to the book and together show how such notions as dialogue, trust, discourse, reputation and rhetoric enrich our understanding of CSR communication and influence the way organizations should be managed. The contributors to the book were also asked to provide suggestions for future research, something we consider to be a crucial feature of the book. We also make the case that CSR, and CSR communication
specifically, should be studied in its own right. The central role corporations have in society merits research in itself as corporations have the ability to influence our daily lives in myriad ways.

In this introductory chapter we first give a short overview of the literature on CSR communication and present the rationale for the book. Then we briefly explain what we mean by CSR, discuss the criticism of the concept and spell out why we think communication has such a crucial role in relation to CSR. The final part of the chapter gives an overview of the structure and content of the book.

The Literature on CSR Communication

CSR is a highly fashionable management concept and something modern managers ignore at their own peril (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Zorn and Collins, 2007). With a few exceptions (e.g., den Hond, de Bakker, and Neergaard, 2007; Smith, Vogel, and Levine, 2010), however, management books are largely silent on the topic of CSR communication. Textbooks like Corporate Responsibility: A Critical Introduction (Blowfield and Murray, 2008) and Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility: Stakeholders in a Global Environment (Werther and Chandler, 2006), typically relegate communication a role in the periphery. The situation is the same in research volumes like The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility (Crane, McWilliams, Matten et al., 2008b), Global Practices of Corporate Social Responsibility (Idowu and Filho, 2009), Corporate Social Responsibility Across Europe (Habisch, Jonker, Wegner, and Schmidpeter, 2005), Developing Corporate Social Responsibility: A European Perspective (Perrini, Pogutz, and Tencati, 2006), and A Handbook of Corporate Governance and Social Responsibility (Aras and Crowther, 2010).

It does not help, either, to look at books that deal with related concepts like corporate citizenship, for example, Handbook of Research on Global Corporate Citizenship (Scherer and Palazzo, 2008). When communication is actually mentioned in this literature, the communication ideal that is implied is often ill-defined and vague. Calls are issued for corporations to engage in stakeholder dialogue and implement transparency/accountability through the publication of nonfinancial reports, but the books seldom mine the insights that can be culled from communication disciplines in this regard.

The situation is better in some of the management journals, particularly in business ethics. Scholars have been particularly occupied with nonfinancial reports (e.g., Aras and Crowther, 2009; Campbell, Shrives, and Bohmbach-Saager, 2001; Clarke and Gibson-Sweet, 1999; Hartman, Rubin, and Dhanda, 2007; Perrini, 2005), communication of corporate ethic codes (e.g., Painter-Morland, 2006; Svensson, Wood, Singh et al., 2009a; Svensson, Wood, Singh et al., 2009b), and stakeholder dialogue processes (e.g., Burchell and Cook, 2006, 2008; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). The list grows longer if we include studies of communication of sustainability (e.g., Jose and Lee, 2007; Kolk, 2003; Livesey and Kearins, 2002).
But again, many of the studies remain in their silos with little or no reference to communication theory or practice (e.g., Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2010).

Actually turning to the communication disciplines, work on CSR communication has been published in journals within fields such as public relations (e.g., Bernays, 1975; Golob and Bartlett, 2007; Wang and Chaudhri, 2009), corporate communication (e.g., Birth, Illia, Lurati et al., 2008; Branco and Rodrigues, 2006; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2007), organizational communication (e.g., Chaudhri and Jian, 2007), marketing communication (e.g., Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, 2008; Podnar, 2008), communication management (e.g., Moreno and Capriotti, 2009), and reputation management (e.g., Fombrun, 2005; Hagen, 2008). These and other contributions will be thoroughly reviewed in the following chapters.

To date and to our knowledge, communication scholars have published one textbook on CSR, Corporate Social Responsibility: Virtue or Vice? (May, 2011), and three edited volumes: Strategic CSR Communication (Morsing and Beckmann, 2006), The Debate Over Corporate Social Responsibility (May, Cheney, and Roper, 2007), and Handbuch Corporate Social Responsibility: Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Grundlagen und Methodische Zugänge [Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility: Theoretical Foundation and Methodological Approaches from Communication Studies] (Raupp, Jarolimek, and Schultz, 2010). The first of these edited, scholarly books raises key issues and challenges that managers face as organizations engage in stakeholder dialogues. The book is very useful, but most of the empirical material is related to Denmark, thus limiting its scope. The title of the second book, The Debate Over Corporate Social Responsibility, gives away the fact that the primary emphasis of the volume is on conceptual foundations for the study of CSR. In other words, the book only contains a few chapters on CSR communication, as such, and stops short of pointing out recommendations for CSR communication. The third book touches on basic concepts of CSR communication, CSR in public communication, interdisciplinary approaches, methodological approaches and case studies. However, the book is published in German and largely focuses on German empirical material, thus limiting its scope and reach.

Taken together then, there has been valuable work on CSR communication in both management and communication and more detailed overviews are presented in chapters to follow. Still, we argue that the work often stays within the limits of its discipline and, furthermore, that it has not reached a critical mass where it has had an impact on mainstream management textbooks. Our goal with this volume is thus to (1) move beyond the scattered journal articles in order to present, discuss and extend on the state-of-the-art insights on CSR communication, and (2) to demonstrate how this research has implications for the strategic management of organizations. As mentioned, we also maintain that CSR and CSR communication deserves to be studied in its own right, since it is such a prominent feature of current business life. The larger backdrop here is the recognition that corporations have become today’s dominating social institution (Deetz, 1992; Korten, 2001).
Defining CSR and CSR Communication: Background and History

Several concepts have been launched to describe the relationship between business and society (see, Elkington, 1998; Henriches and Richardson, 2004; Waddock, 2004; Wood, 1991a). Corporate citizenship is one such notion that has been particularly popular (Waddock, 2001; Windsor, 2001). A journal is dedicated to this concept – Journal of Corporate Citizenship – and large corporations like ExxonMobil and General Electric use the term (e.g., ExxonMobil, 2010; General Electric Company, 2010). Scholars typically point to how corporate citizenship can help to focus on the political role of the corporation, but also that the citizenship concept implies that the corporation has rights, too. Still, the concept has its fair share of detractors, criticizing it for being fundamentally instrumental and self-serving, and masking the profound role of corporations in society (Matten, Crane, and Chapple, 2003; Windsor, 2001).

Several authors prefer to use the term corporate responsibility (e.g., Chen and Bouvain, 2009; Heath and Palenchar, 2008; Hillenbrand and Money, 2007). This is also the term favored by large corporations like Chevron (2010) and ING Group (2010). Probably the best argument for using corporate responsibility is that the term directs attention to how the responsibilities of business extend to the economic sphere and the environment. The latter point is also implicated in the number of large corporations that prefer the term sustainability when they issue their nonfinancial reports. Examples include Shell (2010), BP (2010), and Ford (2010).

Our decision to use CSR, however, is rooted partly in our agreement with the criticism of the corporate citizenship concept, and partly in the pragmatic reason that most of the research literature uses this term (e.g., Burchell, 2008; Crane, Matten, and Spence, 2008; Crane, McWilliams, Matten et al., 2008b; Crowther and Rayman-Bacchus, 2004b; den Hond et al., 2007; Habisch et al., 2005; Idowu and Filho, 2009; May et al., 2007; Vogel, 2005; Werther and Chandler, 2006). The term is also frequently used in business, including large corporations like China National Petroleum Corporation (2010). CSR is still “a dominant, if not exclusive, term in the academic literature and in business practice” (Carroll and Shabana, 2010, p. 86). (See also Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 for different takes on this discussion.)

CSR has a relatively long tradition rooted in notions of philanthropy, but also as a reaction against business’ social transgression (Mitchell, 1989). Still, it is the 1953 book Social Responsibility of the Businessman by Howard R. Bowen that is most frequently credited as laying the foundation for CSR thinking (Carroll, 1999). Many scholars agree that the notion gained foothold during the 1960s as a form of business response to new and stronger social demands (Buchholz and Rosenthal, 1999/2002; Carroll, 1999; Wood, 1991b). Since the late 1990s, however, the relationship between business and society has been discussed with more vigor than