



## **Transcending transmission**

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## **TRANSCENDING TRANSMISSION: TOWARDS A CONSTITUTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON CSR COMMUNICATION**

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# **TRANSCENDING TRANSMISSION: TOWARDS A CONSTITUTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON CSR COMMUNICATION**

## **Structured Abstract**

### **Purpose**

Extant research on CSR communication primarily relies on a transmission model of communication that treats organizations and communication as distinct phenomena. This approach has been criticized for neglecting the formative role of communication in the emergence of organizations. In this paper, we propose to reconceptualize CSR communication by drawing on the “communication constitutes organizations” (CCO) perspective.

### **Approach**

This is a conceptual paper. We explore the implications of switching from an instrumental to a constitutive notion of communication.

### **Findings**

Our study brings forth four main findings: (1) From the CCO view, organizations are constituted by several, partly dissonant, and potentially contradictory communicative practices. From that viewpoint, the potential impact of CSR communication becomes a matter of connectivity of CSR to other practices of organizational communication. (2) Communication practices that concern CSR should not be generally dismissed as mere “greenwashing”—given that some forms of talk can be action. Consequently, we need to investigate which specific speech acts create accountability and commitment in the context of CSR. (3) The CCO view shows that CSR communication potentially extends the boundary of the organization through the involvement of third parties. Thus, it is fruitful to study CSR communication as a set of practices that aims at

boundary maintenance and extension. (4) Organizations are stabilized by various non-human entities that “act” on their behalf. Accordingly, CSR communication should also take into account non-human agency and responsibility.

### **Originality/value**

Our paper links the literature on CSR communication to broader debates in organizational communication studies and, in particular, to the CCO perspective. By applying the CCO view, we reconceptualize CSR communication as a complex process of meaning negotiation.

### **Keywords**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR); CSR communication; corporate communication; “communication constitutes organizations” (CCO); polyphony

## **TRANSCENDING TRANSMISSION: TOWARDS A CONSTITUTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON CSR COMMUNICATION**

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) originates in the field of organization and management studies. Recent publications in this area (e.g., Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Vaara and Tienari, 2008) point out that CSR also poses a *communicative* challenge: how can a corporation gain and maintain legitimacy in and through communication? In response to this question, a new research area of “CSR communication” has emerged, which interconnects insights from the fields of organization and communication studies (for a recent overview, see Ihlen *et al.*, 2011). A significant part of this literature, however, tends to exhibit an instrumental or mechanistic understanding of communication (e.g., Birth *et al.*, 2008; Du *et al.*, 2010), which implies that information and meaning are transmitted in “packages” from one sender to one or more receivers. This “transmission view” of CSR communication can be criticized for reducing communication to a mere instrument and for neglecting the formative role of communication in constituting, altering, and perpetuating organizations (see Christensen and Cheney, 2011).

In this paper we propose to switch from a transmission view to a “constitutive” understanding of CSR communication. The constitutive view (e.g., Craig, 1999) underscores the formative role of communication in all kinds of social phenomena, including organizations (Cooren, 2012). From that viewpoint, communication is understood as a complex process of continuous meaning negotiation (e.g., Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009). This view has recently come to be known as the “communication constitutes organizations” or “CCO” perspective (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). Within this perspective, Ashcraft and her colleagues (2009) distinguish between *explicit* strains of CCO thinking—that is, works that directly address the constitutive role of communication in organizations (e.g., Luhmann, 2000;

McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Taylor and Van Every, 2000)—and *embedded* strains, where the constitutive assumption is rather implicit (e.g., Deetz, 2005; Monge and Contractor, 2003; Mumby, 2001). Drawing on these works and especially on the explicit strains, we will explore how switching from a mechanistic to a constitutive notion of communication alters the understanding of CSR communication.

Our application of the CCO view to CSR communication yields four main findings. First, the CCO view proposes that organizations are constituted by many partly dissonant and contradictory communicative practices (Cooren *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, CSR-related communicative practices can only gain influence if they are resonant with other communicative practices that are at the center of an organization’s value creation (i.e. typically the ones driven by an economic logic). Second, the CCO view is grounded in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1967), which argues that certain forms of talk can be action and that certain speech acts (such as promises) can talk the communicative reality they speak of into being. On those grounds, corporations that engage in practices of CSR communication should not generally be accused of “decoupling” talk from action or of mere “greenwashing” (e.g., Laufer, 2003), because CSR communication can at least trigger a “creeping” commitment to CSR practices over time (Christensen *et al.*, 2010; Haack *et al.*, 2012). Third, practices of CSR communication can extend the boundary of the organization. According to the CCO view, the organizational boundary is not given but needs to be continuously (re-)established through communication (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaug, 2000). This becomes particularly evident in the case of CSR, where practices of stakeholder involvement invite third parties to co-constitute these communicative boundaries. This trend became more pronounced with the advent of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, or blogs), through which various members of an organization engage in

dialogue with stakeholders and the broader public (Capriotti, 2011). Thus, the CCO view points out a direct connection between practices of CSR communication and the fundamental question of boundary maintenance. Fourth, proponents of the CCO view (e.g., Cooren 2006) assume that the organization as a communicative entity is constituted and stabilized over time by various non-human entities (e.g., texts, processes, scripts, routines) that “act” on its behalf and whose influence extends beyond local and situational circumstances. Accordingly, CSR communication will need to take into account also the agency and responsibility of *non-human* entities.

The contribution of our paper is threefold: first, we contribute to the emerging literature on CSR communication by proposing the alternative theoretical lens of the CCO perspective (Craig, 1999). The CCO view perceives CSR communication not simply as an instrument for achieving strategic goals but, crucially, as one of several voices that invoke notions of ethics and responsibility within the entire organization. Second, we contribute to research on CSR more generally: the constitutive view ascribes to communication a primary role in the study of organizational phenomena (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009), emphasizing that third parties (such as NGOs and other stakeholders) contribute jointly to the communicative constitution of organizations. In doing so, it acknowledges the dynamic processes through which corporate social (ir)responsibility is attributed to certain actors and argues that this process cannot be fully controlled by CSR communication and management (Lange and Washburn, 2012). Third, our conceptual paper helps expand the CCO view by addressing the role of communication in the constitution of individual organizations, as well as in their embeddedness; that is, in interorganizational relations—for example, between a corporation and its various stakeholders (Koschmann *et al.*, 2012; Kuhn, 2008).

## **CSR Communication as a Research Field and Underlying Models of Communication**

The research field of CSR communication has grown significantly in recent years. A number of edited volumes (e.g., Ihlen *et al.*, 2001; May *et al.*, 2007) and journal articles (e.g., Du *et al.*, 2010; May and Zorn, 2003) provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant research. This research area is influenced by studies from public relations and corporate communication (e.g., Ellerup Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009; Hagen, 2008; Morsing, 2006; Morsing and Schultz, 2009), organizational communication (e.g., Christensen and Cheney, 2011; May, 2011; May and Zorn, 2003; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010), marketing communication (e.g., Maignan and Ferrell, 2004; Podnar, 2008), and organization and management studies (e.g., Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Humphreys and Brown, 2008; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). In the following, we will differentiate between the main streams that can be discerned in this heterogeneous body of research by looking at which (explicit or implicit) notion of communication they center on.

### ***The transmission view***

In a classic article, Axley (1984) analyzed a wide range of publications in organization and management studies that address the topic of communication. He arrived at the conclusion that most of these works at least implicitly draw on a “transmission” or “conduit” metaphor of communication. This mechanistic metaphor represents communication primarily as a means of achieving a certain goal, or as the channel through which information or messages are transported from a sender to a receiver as though in packages (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Axley (1984) criticizes this approach for reducing communication into a linear, unidirectional process of dissemination of information. In his view, the idea that information can be transferred in packages from sender to receiver is highly problematic, given that meaning can always be subject to contestation and a one-to-one transfer of meaning is hardly possible. Therefore, and in



order to capture the complexity of communication, the followers of Axley's view suggest that communication should be conceptualized instead as a dynamic and highly selective process of continuous meaning negotiation (e.g., Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Luhmann, 1992).

The transmission model of communication is prevalent in a large proportion of publications on CSR communication, especially in works originating in the fields of public relations, marketing communication, or management studies. For instance, Golob and Bartlett (2007) grasp CSR communication as a tool for disseminating information about a corporation's social activities. Similarly, Esrock and Leichty (1998) elaborate on the opportunities that CSR communication creates for agenda-setting. These publications describe CSR communication primarily as a means of influencing the way in which stakeholders perceive the corporation (e.g., Birth *et al.*, 2008; Du *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, these works explore mainly how CSR communication can be calibrated to fulfill a corporation's strategic goals most effectively. Furthermore, according to May (2011, p. 102), extant research on CSR communication focuses primarily on *external* communication, i.e., what firms communicate to their environment through brochures, reports, or websites. At the same time, some of these works pursue the idea of "integrated communication"; that is, the effort to get an organization to speak "homophonically," i.e. in accord with each other (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). Below we provide a few typical examples of how the transmission model is presented in works on CSR communication (our own emphases):

How to think *strategically* about CSR communication and its consequences, and how to employ different communication *tools* to meet stakeholders' (and especially customers') expectations of CSR issues? (Podnar, 2008, p. 76)

Corporate *messages* can also emphasize the affiliation linking stakeholders to the firm based on a shared concern for, or commitment to, a specific issue. Such communications establish CSR as a potential bond between the firm and its stakeholders. (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004, p. 15)

Our major objective is to review and synthesize the existing literature on CSR communication to provide insights into how companies can communicate their CSR activities *more effectively*. (Du *et al.*, 2010, p. 9)

Terms like “tools” or “messages,” or attributes such as “strategic” or “effective” are suggestive of an instrumental notion of communication. In a related strand of the literature, however, the strategic-instrumental view of CSR communication is complemented by the idea of bidirectionality and dialogue. In a widely cited article, Morsing and Schultz (2006, p. 326) differentiate between three main strategies in CSR communication: the stakeholder information strategy (i.e. public information, one-way communication), the stakeholder response strategy (i.e. two-way but still asymmetric communication), and the stakeholder involvement strategy (i.e. two-way symmetric communication). Although the authors acknowledge the significance of all three strategies, they argue that CSR communication will benefit from developing further in the direction of the stakeholder involvement strategy; that is, by involving third parties (like NGOs) as symmetric partners in corporate communication (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, p. 336). A number of scholars have responded to this call; for instance, by emphasizing the importance of interactivity that is facilitated by technological means (e.g., Capriotti, 2011; Capriotti and Moreno, 2007) or by shedding light on the effectiveness of dialogue in CSR communication (e.g., Golob and Podnar, 2011; Johansen and Ellerup Nielsen, 2011).

Nevertheless, the works on CSR communication we have discussed in this section appear to share the underlying assumption that organizations and communication are distinct phenomena; that is, they view organizations as entities that exist separately from communication: “Contemporary notions of business ethics [...] operate with [...] a ‘container metaphor’ of organizational communication according to which organizations *produce* communication, not as their general way of being or existence but as something distinct from their organizational practices” (Christensen *et al.*, 2010, p. 461; emphasis in original). Consequently, according to this view, it makes sense to investigate how corporations can make use of communication most effectively. Notwithstanding its merits, especially the guidance it provides to business practice, the transmission view has been criticized by organizational communication scholars for neglecting the fundamental constitution of organizations by communication (e.g., Christensen and Cheney, 2011). Accordingly, we will now turn to works oriented towards a constitutive understanding of CSR communication.

### ***The constitutive view***

In his “constitutive” model of communication, Craig proposes that the transmission model of communication can be transcended if the fundamental role of language in shaping the perception of social reality is acknowledged: “Communication is theorized as a process that produces and reproduces – and in that way constitutes – social order” (Craig, 1999, p. 128). He goes on to argue that the constitutive model is advantageous because it defines communication as the fundamental modality of social reality (see also Taylor and Van Every, 2000): “The constitutive model offers the discipline of communication a focus, a central intellectual role, and a cultural mission (i.e., to critique cultural manifestations of the transmission model)” (Craig, 1999, p. 125).

In the field of CSR communication research, an increasing number of publications adopt this constitutive understanding of communication either explicitly (e.g., Christensen and Cheney, 2011; Christensen *et al.*, 2010) or implicitly (e.g., Bartlett *et al.*, 2007; May, 2011; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). For instance, Christensen and Cheney assert that

The basic premise is that communication is not simply a mechanism through which organizations convey their objectives, intentions, and avowedly good deeds, including their various CSR activities, but a continuous process through which social actors explore, construct, negotiate, and modify what it means to be a socially responsible organization. (2011, p. 491)

This social-constructionist understanding of CSR communication can be traced back to earlier works by Cheney and his colleagues. Cheney and McMillan, for instance, put forth a constitutive understanding of organizations and of their relations with stakeholders as early as in 1990: “The organization emerges [...] through the communicative practices of its members and stakeholders” (p. 101). Similarly, Bartlett and her colleagues emphasize “how [CSR communication] practices emerged out of social construction between organisations and stakeholders” (Bartlett *et al.*, 2007, p. 294). In this view, CSR communication is simply one of many communicative practices that collectively constitute the phenomenon we call organization (together with other communicative practices that address topics such as marketing, accounting, finance, etc.). At the same time, the constitutive notion of communication naturally points to the inherent interrelations and dynamic interplay between external and internal communication (see, e.g., Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Christensen *et al.*, 2010; Morsing, 2006; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010).

Taken together, these works can be seen as an important first step towards grounding CSR communication research in a constitutive notion of communication (e.g., Christensen and Cheney, 2011). In this paper we aim to advance this trend by linking CSR communication to what is called the *explicit* CCO view (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009). To the best of our knowledge, the topic of CSR communication has yet to be systematically investigated from a constitutive perspective that includes most of the recent works that define the CCO view as a broader theoretical inquiry (e.g., Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009; Brummans *et al.*, forthcoming)—and this is what we aim to achieve in the following sections.

### **The “Communication Constitutes Organizations” (CCO) Perspective**

The CCO perspective puts forth the idea that organizations can be seen first and foremost as phenomena of communication; that is, that organizations arise in and through language use (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). This theoretical perspective has been gaining ground in journals of organization and communication studies over the past decade (for a most recent overview, see Brummans *et al.*, forthcoming). The CCO perspective addresses the ontological question “what is an organization?” (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. ix)—one of the most fundamental issues in organization studies. In response to this question, proponents of the CCO perspective argue that organizations essentially consist of communication (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009). By conceptualizing organizations as interlocking networks of unfolding communication processes (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), the CCO perspective turns the common understanding of organization “inside out” (Blaschke *et al.*, 2012) arguing that it is through communicative practices, and not primarily through specific individual human members, that organizations are created and sustained. In other words, according to this view, organizations do not consist of

directors, managers, and other employees but result from the interactions among these members, as well as between those and third parties (see McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Robichaud *et al.*, 2004).

In a recent handbook article, Brummans *et al.* (forthcoming) list the structuration theory approach of McPhee and his colleagues (e.g., McPhee and Zaug, 2000), the approaches developed by the “Montreal School of Organizational Communication” (e.g., Taylor and Van Every 2000), and Luhmann’s theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1995; Seidl and Becker, 2005) as the three most prominent “schools” of explicit CCO thinking. In the following, we draw primarily on the works of the Montreal School and of Luhmann because their underlying social-constructionist epistemologies contrast most starkly with the transmission model that was described above.

In one of the most influential works of the Montreal School, Taylor and Van Every (2000) conceptualize organizations as alternating episodes of conversation (where the organization is accomplished *in situ*) and textualization (where the organization is a recognizable actor that creates textual representations of itself): “The textual dimension corresponds with the recurring, fairly stable and uneventful side of communication [...], while the conversational dimension refers to the lively and evolving co-constructive side of communication” (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009, p. 20). Similarly, Luhmann (2000) grasps organizations as self-referential and interconnected events of communication. In this context, however, we need to consider that conversations, as the main “building blocks” of organizations (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009, p. 7), are inherently ephemeral in character (Hernes and Bakken, 2003, p. 1522). Organizational continuation and survival depend on whether dispersed communication events can achieve “connectivity”; that is, whether they can interconnect in a self-referential manner (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Weick, 1995). This echoes the emphasis that certain CCO

scholars place on the “precarious” character of organizations as communicative phenomena. These scholars define organizations “as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily [...] in communication processes” (Cooren *et al.*, 2011, p. 1150). In a similar vein, Cooren and Fairhurst raise the question of how local and ephemeral interactions collectively form longer-lasting and stabilized forms of organization: “It is this *source of stability* that needs to be unveiled” (2009, p. 123; emphasis in original).

In response to this crucial issue, we identify in the CCO literature four main tenets that can explain the stabilization and perpetuation of organizations as communicative entities: (1) organizations are sites where meaning is continuously negotiated. Consequently, according to this notion, various potentially contradictory communicative practices coexist within the organization (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). As Cornelissen (2012) points out, in situations of high complexity and undefined meaning, actors within and outside the organization tend to engage in discursive struggles on sensegiving and framing. In this view, conflicts are a key driver of organizational perpetuation, because they create the need for engaging in further communication and decision-making (Nassehi, 2005). (2) Drawing on speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), proponents of the CCO view assume that certain forms of talk can represent action; in other words, that acts of language use have the potential not only to *reflect* but also to *create* processual instances in the world, such as organizational phenomena (Cooren, 2012). (3) In order to stabilize their existence in communication, organizations also have to establish and maintain a boundary between what is included in and what is excluded from the organization. However, in the CCO view, this boundary is drawn through acts of communication, which necessitates its continuous reproduction and maintenance (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaugg, 2000). (4) Finally, proponents of the CCO view emphasize the importance of *non-human agency*

for the stabilization and perpetuation of organizational phenomena: non-human entities (e.g., texts, tools, technologies, or other artifacts) are seen as agents in their own right, in the sense that they have the capability to “act” (Cooren, 2006) by virtue of their mere presence (e.g., a sign at the entrance of a restaurant stating that a private party is being held stops those not invited from entering). Such entities remain robust over time, as they become detached from their authors’ intentions and the initial context of their creation (Kuhn, 2008). With relation to organizations, we can conclude that, in effect, organizations come into existence with the help of various forms of “non-human” entities that act *on behalf of* the organization and thus help to maintain its processual existence over time (Taylor and Cooren, 1997).

### **Towards an Explicit Constitutive View of CSR Communication**

After our brief introduction to the CCO perspective (e.g., Ashcraft *et al.* 2009; Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009), we can now apply this theoretical approach to the field of CSR communication (e.g., Du *et al.*, 2010; Ihlen *et al.* 2011; May *et al.*, 2007). Our application leads to four main conclusions on CSR communication that draw directly on the four central tenets of the CCO perspective, as described above:

*(1) The impact of CSR communication practices depends on the extent to which they become connected to and are resonant with other organizational communication practices.*

Starting from the idea that communication is *constitutive* of organizational phenomena, the CCO perspective focuses on the interplay of various communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization (both internally and externally; see Cheney and Christensen, 2001). At the same time, the CCO perspective grasps organizations as *polyphonic* in nature; that is, as constituted collectively by partly dissonant and contradictory communicative practices (Kornberger *et al.*, 2006). As Humphreys and Brown (2002, p. 422) put it, “organizations are not



discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic, involving multiple dialogical practices that occur simultaneously and sequentially.” Thus, CSR communication is merely *one* of various communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization and evolve in continuous competition with one another; indeed, CSR communication in itself is subject to continuous contestation (Christensen and Cheney, 2011). Like other practices of this type, CSR communication involves various forms of storytelling, narration, and attempts at sensemaking (Caruana & Crane, 2008; Humphreys and Brown, 2008; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). The question that arises is whether specific practices of CSR communication can be deemed “authoritative” and legitimate (Kuhn, 2008). To shed light on this question, it would be fruitful to study the interplay of various polyphonic practices in their continuous struggle for meaning and recognition (see Christensen and Cheney, 2011).

The idea of polyphony and contestation suggests that CSR-related communicative practices can only become authoritative and influential if they establish a close connection to other communicative practices that are at the center of an organization’s value creation (i.e. typically those driven by an economic rationality; see Battilana and Dorado, 2010); in other words, instead of being confined to the periphery of the organization (e.g., to a “satellite” CSR department), CSR practices ought to become integrated with other organizational (communication) practices across the firm. One way of achieving this would be to translate CSR into the “language of profitability” by defining it as a means of reducing reputational risks (cf. Haack *et al.*, 2012). Thus, translation of this kind can increase the chances of CSR finding resonance throughout and beyond the organization (Humphreys and Brown, 2008; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). This suggestion is in accord with the existing literature on the “business case for CSR” (e.g., Carroll and Shabana, 2010) and alludes to the question of whether ethical

affordances can indeed be compatible with profit maximization. The CCO perspective on CSR communication makes clear that, in order to manage CSR communication, actors need to be able to cope with the contradictions and paradoxes that may arise between different motives for practicing CSR and to balance between the ideal of corporate citizenship (e.g. Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008; Matten and Crane, 2005) and demands for profitability (e.g., Porter and Kramer, 2006). Rather than striving for a unified “voice,” the constitutive view can help articulate more pluralistically the paradoxes and contradictions that are inherent in these two different logics (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Scherer *et al.*, forthcoming) and enable mutual sensemaking between their proponents (Humphrey and Brown, 2008).

Unlike the CCO perspective, the transmission view can be criticized for overemphasizing the external side of CSR communication: “To date, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on the external communication of CSR. [...] Ideally, though, researchers would also begin to explore the integration (or lack thereof) between CSR communication that is externally and internally focused” (May, 2011, p. 102). The CCO view instead avoids making a clear-cut distinction between external and internal communication processes by emphasizing that both dimensions contribute significantly to the communicative constitution of the organization (e.g., Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). Thus, the CCO perspective addresses CSR communication more broadly, encompassing both the communicative practices that corporations employ strategically to inform external stakeholders (such as CSR reports) and internal communicative practices that can be affected by issues of CSR (e.g., existing practices of accounting, marketing, or finance).

(2) *Practices of CSR communication should not be dismissed as mere “greenwashing,” given that talk can be action.*

The second of the four tendencies discerned in publications that take a critical look at CSR communication is that corporations use such CSR practices as “greenwashing” (e.g., Banerjee, 2008; Laufer, 2003). The notion of “greenwashing” refers to the efforts to create through communication activities an environmentally responsible public image that does not match an organization’s actual activities. Most of these works are characterized by the classic distinction between talk and action (Brunsson, 1989). A similar distinction is encountered in institutional theory, where the concept of *decoupling* describes the gap between an organization’s façade, i.e. talk, and its actual activities, i.e. action (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). As Christensen and Langer note in the context of CSR communication: “Many of us tend to focus and insist on the *differences* between what the organizations say and what they do” (2009, p. 143; emphasis in original). This reflects the assumption that talk is “cheap,” whereas action is what really matters. In this view, practices of CSR communication are justified only if they fully correspond to an organization’s deeds.

However, CSR communication scholars who follow the CCO view (e.g., Christensen *et al.*, 2010) emphasize that decoupled CSR communication practices may have important further consequences. With their concept of “aspirational talk,” Christensen and his colleagues (2010) highlight that even if the public self-representation of an organization as a socially responsible corporate citizen is decoupled from actual business practices, this form of talk can nevertheless be a powerful driver of organizational change:

If communication is the “essential modality” (Taylor and Van Every, 2000) for organizational life, we should not disregard *aspirational talk*, as we often find in programmes of corporate social responsibility, as something superficial or detached from organizational practice. Talking about actions is talking about communication. And vice versa. Talk about plans and intentions is action just as actions in these areas simultaneously speak. [...] Even when corporate ambitions to do good vis-à-vis society do not reflect managerial action, talk about such ambitions provides articulations of ideals, beliefs, values and frameworks for decisions – in other words, *raw material for constructing the organization*. (Christensen *et al.*, 2010, p. 461; emphases in original)

From this viewpoint, even the most “greenwashed” (Laufer, 2003) forms of communication can have a *performative* character (see Austin, 1962; Searle; 1969), in the sense that they generate pressure to create the very reality they refer to. Thus, through “aspirational talk” (Christensen *et al.*, 2010) business firms generate at least a “creeping commitment” (Haack *et al.*, 2012) to couple or re-couple the application of organizational activities to their description, albeit in the future. This prompts the crucial question of whether decoupling is stable in the long run at all and under which conditions aspirational talk can actually lead to re-coupling. In this context, it is worthwhile to explore the processes and dynamics of storytelling and meaning negotiation that determine whether “aspirational talk” in CSR communication actually becomes incorporated in organizational activities and structures or not (Haack *et al.*, 2012). To conclude, the CCO view invites us to differentiate between various speech acts within CSR communication and to examine to what extent such acts can compel an organization to give substance to the verbal commitments that such speech acts imply.

(3) *According to the CCO view, by involving third parties, CSR communication can extend and permeate the boundary of the communicatively constituted organization.*

A third characteristic of a large part of the literature on CSR communication (e.g., Du *et al.*, 2010) is that the organization is understood either as a “container” of *internal* communication processes or as a producer of *external* communication processes (Putnam *et al.*, 1996). In contrast, from the CCO view the organization is perceived to originate in communication (e.g., Taylor and Van Every, 2000). From this perspective, literally every communicative act that refers to the organization can contribute to the organization’s communicative constitution and *act on its behalf* (Taylor and Cooren, 1997). This view of corporate communication sheds new light on the classic distinction between internal and external communication (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001). More specifically, the explicit CCO view underscores that third parties—such as the media, NGOs, or other stakeholders—can also contribute (jointly) to the organization’s communicative constitution (Kjærgaard *et al.*, 2011). For instance, an article in the mass media or in social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs) that reports on the CSR activities of a multinational corporation reinforces that organization’s communicative constitution by publicly referring to it as a collective actor (for instance: “BP promises enhanced safety standards”).

From the CCO viewpoint, practices of CSR communication can play a crucial role in extending the boundary of the organization. This is because, according to this perspective, the organizational boundary is not given but needs to be continuously (re-)established in and through communication (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaug, 2000). This is fully in line with Heath’s assertion that “boundaries result, not from perimeters of an organization’s property or from membership in an organization, but from dimensions of zones of meaning” (1993, p. 146). In

other words, an organization's boundaries are not demarcated by the wired fence surrounding the company site or by work contracts that define the inclusion or exclusion of individual actors, but by continuous *communicative* practices that establish, renegotiate, and maintain the boundary (McPhee and Zaig 2000). For instance, a farewell email sent by a former colleague who is leaving to take up a job with a different company reaffirms through communication that his or her former colleagues remain company members "within" the organizational boundaries.

The above shows that practices of CSR communication and stakeholder involvement (Morsing and Schultz, 2006) invite third parties to co-constitute the organization communicatively. As a consequence of this, however, it becomes less clear who is a legitimate and "authorized" speaker that can talk on the organization's behalf and who is not (Kuhn, 2008; Taylor and Van Every, 2011). This lack of clarity is even more pronounced in the age of social media, where various members of an organization may engage in dialogue with stakeholders and society at large (Capriotti, 2011). Moreover, it raises the fundamental question of boundary maintenance in the context of CSR communication via social media; especially, how organizations cope with the potential extension of their boundaries through CSR communication that can occur through social media (Kjærgaard and Morsing, 2012).

*(4) It is necessary to take into account the responsibility of non-human agents in CSR communication.*

Based on the idea of the fundamentally *ephemeral* and *precarious* character of communication (Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009; Hernes and Bakken, 2003), the CCO view stresses that organizations as communicative entities are stabilized by *non-human agents*, such as texts, processes, scripts, or routines, which can "act" on the organization's behalf. Here, agency is broadly defined as an entity's capability "to make a difference"; in other words, the mere

existence of this entity alters patterns of behavior (Cooren, 2004, p. 373). Having agency, however, also implies responsibility. This also applies to the organization, which Cooren (2006) perceives as a “plenum” of multiple agencies. In that context, CSR communication concerns not only the agency and responsibility of individual human actors but also those of non-human actors, such as established communicative practices. This has significant implications for the current literature on CSR, because it requires that the agency of communicative practices is taken into account even where it is not possible to identify a specific individual as the initial author of a practice (Kuhn, 2008). However, in this context, it should be stressed that the CCO view does not dismiss individual responsibility for one’s actions but argues that agency and responsibility become automatically embedded in communicative practices and can be independent of the actors’ initial intentions. In other words, whenever a certain communicative practice or artifact leaves the context of its creation, its author(s) cannot have full control over its meaning, potential interpretations, and recurrent enactments (Kuhn, 2008).

Let us illustrate these theoretical considerations with an example: a consulting firm may have established the practice of hosting extravagant social functions that are paid from the expenses account and then billed to the clients’ accounts. In this scenario, the cost of alcoholic drinks etc. is hidden within a lump sum that clients have to pay for the consultants’ services. New consultants “learn” this practice from repeatedly participating in such events. If the practice remains unquestioned and is simply taken for granted, new recruits will most likely contribute to its reproduction in the future. From a client’s point of view, however, this practice may be unethical or at least morally questionable. If a client condemned this practice, and if the firm decided to put an end to it, the typical reaction would be to identify the individuals who had been

involved in it and sanction them. Nevertheless, this would not resolve the question of who “invented” or “authored” such a practice in the first place.

To conclude, the CCO view helps observers identify signs of institutionalization of unethical business practices independently of individual human authorship (Kuhn, 2008). Thus, a constitutive notion of CSR communication requires that phenomena of non-human (or supra-individual) agency and responsibility are also taken into account. In the case of organizations, this means that CSR communication should acknowledge the potential agency of various established practices, texts, etc. that collectively constitute the organization and allow them to be placed under societal scrutiny.

The main differences between the transmission view and the constitutive view of CSR communication that were outlined in this section are summarized and compared in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this paper, we have argued that a significant part of the existing literature on CSR communication (e.g., Du *et al.*, 2010) is largely based on a transmission model of communication. In contrast to these works, we put forward a *constitutive* view of CSR communication, which acknowledges the formative role of communication practices in the context of organizations. On the basis of this theoretical shift, our contribution to the existing literature is threefold: first, we contribute to the emerging literature on *CSR communication*. Applying the theoretical lens of the CCO perspective (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999), we showed



that this view is particularly useful for questioning the strategic-instrumental notion of CSR communication. As we explained at length, from the CCO viewpoint, organizations are perceived as polyphonic phenomena that emerge in and through communication. In this context, CSR communication is seen as one of several communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization. Consequently, whether or not CSR communication has an impact within the organization depends on the extent to which it is resonant with and becomes connected to other communicative practices, especially those geared to profitability. Furthermore, CSR communication processes cannot be completely and intentionally determined by individual actors. In sum, the CCO view does not perceive CSR communication simply as a managerial tool and in addition acknowledges the emergent, processual, and dynamic character of communicative practices.

Second, we contribute to CSR research more generally, drawing attention to the primacy of communication in the study of organizational phenomena (Ashcraft *et al.*, 2009), which is central to the constitutive view. In the context of CSR, the constitutive view emphasizes that CSR practices come into being communicatively and that third parties (such as NGOs and other stakeholders) co-constitute organizations through their involvement in CSR communication. Thus, through the inclusion of various stakeholders, CSR communication can shift the (communicatively constituted) boundary of the organization (Heath, 1993). This, in turn, provides the opportunity to focus on the notion that legitimacy and responsibility are constituted in complex processes of meaning negotiation that involve not only the organization itself but also various other actors (see Lange and Washburn, 2012). As we argued, these aspects of CSR are particularly important in the age of social media (Capriotti, 2011), which demand a new

understanding of the fundamental embeddedness of corporations in the communication processes of society at large.

Third, our conceptual paper helps broaden the CCO perspective: to date, very few studies have applied the CCO perspective to address the role of communication in the constitution of interorganizational settings. Our study advances the line of thinking developed by Kuhn and his colleagues (Koschmann *et al.*, 2012; Kuhn, 2008), by showing that organizations are inherently embedded in communicative interrelations and continuous negotiations of meaning with other organizations. We believe that this finding could provide an important opportunity for the CCO perspective to complement other communication-centered approaches that are more normative in character and emphasize the importance of deliberative dialogue for the legitimation of corporations in a globalized world (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2007).

Finally, our conceptual paper has important implications for business practice and for how business and society interrelate. As explained earlier, switching to the explicit CCO view implies that CSR communication can only gain traction within organizations—corporations in particular—if it becomes connected to other core communicative practices. In practical terms, this means that CSR communication should not be reduced to a corporate function that is fulfilled by a stand-alone (or “satellite”) department of CSR or corporate communications, but should be treated as a holistic endeavor that encompasses the organization as a whole. This is particularly relevant in the age of social media and blogging, where literally every employee, from the CEO down to the worker on the ground, can potentially become a crucial actor of CSR communication (Kjærgaard and Morsing, 2012) and where the polyphonic (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011) and contradictory (Scherer *et al.*, forthcoming) nature of corporations is increasingly visible. In this context, the constitutive view of CSR communication implies that the

role of managers in charge of CSR communication should not be limited to the dissemination of information but should also involve the tasks of “sensemaking” (Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Caruana and Crane, 2008) and “translation” (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010), which can help CSR communication practices to gain resonance within the organization.

Furthermore, as we have emphasized by drawing on the notion of non-human agency (e.g., Cooren, 2004), the CCO view also widens the scope of CSR communication management, which, as CCO scholars point out, involves dealing also with the supra-individual institutionalization of (ir)responsible business practices and their material consequences. In other words, managing CSR communication entails handling challenges that arise from the responsibility and agency not only of individual organizational members but also of non-human entities, such as texts, tools, templates, scripts, or routines. Finally, the CCO perspective allows the integration of the field of CSR communication research into a broader theory of society (Luhmann 1995) by grounding it in the epistemology of the communicative constitution of social reality (Cooren 2012). For that reason, the CCO perspective is particularly suitable for highlighting the fundamental communicative embeddedness of corporations into society at large and the contribution of corporations to sensemaking processes also on the societal level (Haack *et al.*, 2012; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006).

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