

## **Transcending the transmission model**

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**Transcending the Transmission Model: A Reconstruction of CSR  
Communication From a Constitutive Perspective**

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## **Transcending the Transmission Model: A Reconstruction of CSR Communication From a Constitutive Perspective**

### **Abstract**

Extant research on CSR communication has focused primarily on external communication, i.e. what firms communicate to their environment. At the same time, a large part of this literature exhibits a mechanistic understanding of communication that implies the possibility of a package-like transfer of information and meaning from sender to receiver. However, this notion of communication can be criticized for neglecting the constitutive role of communication for organizations. As an alternative, these authors propose a theoretical perspective known as “communication constitutes organizations” (CCO). The CCO view allows for grasping organizations as holistic and polyphonic communicative entities. Hence, what are the implications for CSR communication when we switch from a mechanistic to a constitutive notion of communication?

Our application of the CCO view yields three main findings: (1) CSR communication represents only one of several communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization and that evolve in competition with one another; (2) CSR communication is not only a function of (large-scale) formal organizations, but as a communicative activity it can itself also form the constitutive basis for the emergence of rudimentary, local, and temporary forms of organizing; (3) According to the CCO view, organizations are constituted and stabilized by various non-human entities (e.g., texts or other artifacts) that “act” on their behalf. Thus, CSR communication would need to take also into account the agency and responsibility of these non-human entities, which in some cases lack concrete individual human creators who could be held accountable for.

Taken together, our paper links the literature on CSR communication to broader debates in organizational communication studies. By applying the CCO view, we arrive at a new understanding of CSR communication that allows for comprehending the legitimacy and accountability of organizations as holistic communicative phenomena and helps to transcend a one-sided accentuation of the external side of CSR communication.

**Keywords**

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

## **Transcending the Transmission Model: A Reconstruction of CSR Communication From a Constitutive Perspective**

Recent publications on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Vaara and Tienari, 2008) argue that CSR is an inherently *communicative* challenge: How can a corporation gain legitimacy in and through communication? Consequently, even though having its roots in organization and management studies, CSR has also successively entered the field of communication studies, forming a new research area that has come to be called “CSR communication” (for a recent overview, see Ihlen, Bartlett and May, 2011). However, according to May (2011: 102), extant research on CSR communication (e.g., Du et al. 2010) has focused primarily on *external* communication, i.e., what firms communicate to their environment by means of brochures, reports, websites, or in form of stakeholder dialogues. At the same time, a large part of this literature exhibits a mechanistic understanding of communication that implies the possibility of a package-like transmission of information and meaning from sender to receiver (see Axley, 1984). However, as recent corporate scandals have shown, even highly awarded and successful cases of CSR communication can easily lose their credibility if CSR communication is merely seen as a tool that is largely decoupled from actual business practices. For instance, while German industrial giant Siemens used to be seen as best practice example of CSR communication, it fell down hard when scandalous business practices came to the attention of a wider public in the Siemens corruption affair from 2006.

Consequently, the transmission model of communication is criticized by scholars from the field of organizational communication studies for favoring a unidirectional and linear understanding of communication and, more fundamentally, for neglecting the *constitutive* role of communication for organizations (e.g., Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, 2009). In other words, according to this view, organizations are inseparable from communication: “The communication activity *is* the organization” (Weick, 1995: 75; own emphasis). As an

alternative, these authors propose a theoretical perspective known as “communication constitutes organizations” or “CCO” (Ashcraft et al. 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen and Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). The CCO perspective is attractive in that it allows for transcending the clear-cut separation between external and internal CSR communication and for acknowledging the contested character of CSR that is subject to continuous meaning negotiation (Christensen and Cheney, 2011). Hence, in this paper, we explore the question: What are the implications for CSR communication when we switch from a mechanistic to a constitutive notion of communication?

Our application of the CCO view to CSR communication yields three main findings: (1) The CCO view grasps organizations as being constituted by a multitude of partly dissonant and contradicting communicative practices (Cooren et al., 2011; Kornberger, Clegg and Carter, 2006). CSR communication then represents only one such practice that evolves in competition to other discursive practices in organizational contexts (both internally and externally; e.g., dominant discourses on profitability; Humphreys and Brown, 2008). Consequently, it is intriguing to study the interplay of these various, polyphonic practices that collectively constitute organizations in a continuous struggle for meaning, recognition, and legitimacy (see Christensen and Cheney, 2011); (2) CCO directs our attention to the processuality and emergence of CSR communication from the bottom-up (see Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009). CSR communication is not only a function of large-scale formal organizations (e.g., multi-national corporations), but as a communicative activity it can itself also form the constitutive basis for the emergence of rudimentary, local, and temporary forms of organizing. CSR communication itself also gives rise to broad ‘zoology’ of organizational phenomena (see Waddock, 2008). In this context, we believe it is fruitful to examine how organizational phenomena that emerge particularly through CSR communication differ from other organizations; (3) Proponents of the CCO view (e.g., Cooren 2006) assume that the organization as communicative entity is constituted and stabilized by various non-human

entities (e.g., artifacts, texts, processes, scripts, routines) that “act” on its behalf and that allow them to make a difference beyond local and situational circumstances. Accordingly, CSR communication would need to take also into account the agency and responsibility of *non-human* entities, which in some cases even lack concrete individual human creators who could be held accountable for (see Kuhn, 2008).

The contribution of our paper is twofold: First of all, we link the literature on CSR communication to broader debates in organizational communication studies and especially the CCO perspective. Second, by applying CCO, we arrive at a new understanding of CSR communication that allows for comprehending the legitimacy and accountability of organizations as holistic communicative phenomena and that helps to transcend a one-sided accentuation of the external side of CSR communication.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the extant literature on CSR communication and analyze this literature with regards to the underlying model of communication. After that, we introduce the emerging CCO perspective as an alternative approach that puts forth the idea of a fundamental constitutive character of communication. Finally, we apply the CCO perspective to the phenomenon of CSR communication and derive theoretical implications. Our study closes with concluding remarks and a brief outlook to further research.



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

The research field of CSR communication has grown significantly in recent years. Various edited volumes (e.g., Ihlen, Bartlett and May, 2001; May, Cheney and Roper, 2007) and journal articles (e.g., Du et al., 2010; Zorn and May, 2003) provide a comprehensive overview of the field. This research area is influenced by authors 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; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Zorn and May, 2003), marketing communication (e.g., Maignan and Ferrell, 2004; Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen, 2008; Podnar, 2008), or organization and management studies (e.g., Humphreys and Brown, 2008; Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Vaara and Tienari, 2008). However, due to its interdisciplinary nature, CSR communication appears as a comparably heterogeneous research area (Ziek, 2009). In the following, we will differentiate existing research on CSR communication regarding its (explicit or implicit) model of communication. In this context, we argue that a significant part of the literature on CSR communication puts forth a mechanistic model of communication (see Axley, 1984), while current research in organizational communication rather leans towards a constitutive model of communication (see Ashcraft et al., 2009).

In a widely cited article, Axley (1984) has analyzed a wide range of publications in organization and management studies that address the topic of communication. He arrives at the conclusion that most of them at least implicitly draw on a ‘transmission’ or ‘conduit’ metaphor. In this mechanistic understanding, communication is a tool or means to achieve a certain objective. It is the channel through which information or messages simply get transported from a sender to a receiver in a package-like transfer (see Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Axley criticizes this notion of communication for neglecting the bidirectional and non-linear character of communication. Instead, communication needs to be conceptualized as a

complex and highly selective process of meaning negotiation (see Luhmann, 1992). Consequently, a one-to-one transfer of information from sender to receiver (as implied in a package-like transfer) is presumed to be impossible or at least highly problematic (see Axley, 1984).

The transmission model of communication is also prevalent in a significant body of publications on CSR communication. This is especially visible in the works that originate in public relations, marketing communication, or management studies. These publications describe CSR communication primarily as a means to influence stakeholder's perceptions of the corporation (e.g., Du et al., 2010). It is then the aim to explore how CSR communication can be calibrated to fulfill a corporation's strategic goals most effectively. Just to provide a few examples from these publications (with 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: 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: 15)

There are a variety of communication *channels* through which information about a company's CSR activities [...] can be disseminated (Du et al., 2010: 13)

Terms like 'messages' or 'channels' or attributes such as 'instrumental' or 'strategic' are used here in a context that implies a mechanistic notion of communication (cf. Axley, 1984). Importantly, these works grasp 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, Thyssen and Morsing, 2010: 461; emphasis in original).

Notwithstanding the merits of the transmission model, especially regarding its proximity to the use of the term ‘communication’ in everyday language and in its functionality for business practice, it can also 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: 102). This assessment is also backed up by Christensen who asserts: “Corporations need not only to open themselves to their surroundings, but also to look internally, become self-reflective, aware of their own practices, as well as their own communication” (Christensen, 2007: 457). In this paper, we argue that the internal side of CSR communication naturally comes into play as soon as we switch from a mechanistic to a constitutive model of communication (see Ashcraft et al., 2009).

In his “constitutive” model of communication, Craig (1999) suggests to transcend the transmission model of communication by acknowledging the fundamental role of language-use for our perception of social reality: “Communication is theorized as a process that produces and reproduces – and in that way constitutes – social order” (Craig, 1999: 128). He goes on to argue that this 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: 125). Furthermore, the constitutive model legitimates a communication-centered lens when approaching social phenomena such as organizations (see Putnam, Philips and Chapman, 1996).

Returning to the field of CSR communication, we recently find an increasing number of publications that follow this constitutive understanding of communication (e.g., Christensen and Cheney, 2011; Christensen et al., 2010; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Winkler, 2011). For instance, Christensen and Cheney explicitly assert:

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. (Christensen and Cheney, 2011: 491)

This social-constructivist understanding of CSR communication is also shared by Winkler when he addresses the question “how codes of ethics, via language used by code producers, aim at shaping corporate reality” (Winkler, 2011: 654). In this understanding, CSR communication is one of multiple communicative practices that collectively constitute the phenomenon we call organization. At the same time, the constitutive notion of communication naturally directs the attention also to the link and the dynamic interplay between external and internal communication (see, e.g., Christensen et al., 2010; Morsing, 2006; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). Taken together, we deem these recent works as important first steps towards a new theoretical grounding of CSR communication research in a constitutive notion of communication. However, in this paper, we want to take this development even further by linking CSR communication to an emerging perspective within organizational communication studies that is known under the label CCO (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). We aim to show that the CCO view allows us to reconceptualize CSR communication as being more than merely a strategic instrument (in particular for maintaining external stakeholder relations) but a social practice that can gain agency in its own right (cf. Cooren, 2006; Kuhn, 2008).

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

In recent years, the interdisciplinary field of organizational communication has given rise to a theoretical perspective that has come to be called “communication constitutes organizations” or, in short, “CCO” (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). The CCO perspective puts forth the idea that organizations can be seen first and foremost as phenomena of communication, i.e., organizations arise in and through language use (Taylor and van Every, 2000). This perspective has grown vividly in recent years, featuring tracks at major conferences (e.g., the European Group of Organizational Studies Colloquium; EGOS), special issues of *Organization Studies* (Cooren et al., 2011) or *Management Communication Quarterly* (Bisel, 2010), edited volumes (e.g., Cooren and Robichaud, forthcoming; Cooren, Taylor, and van Every, 2006; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009), as well as a growing number of publications in other reputable journals (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2004; Kuhn, 2008; Robichaud, Giroux, and Taylor, 2004).

The CCO perspective extends even further if we include works that are in line with CCO thinking but that do not necessarily adopt the CCO label. For instance, in his influential work on change management, Ford suggests that organizations can be understood as “networks of conversations” (1999: 485). In a similar vein, Sillince elaborates a view of organization as continuous “discursive construction” (2007: 363). Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005: 409) go as far as to assert that organizations are literally “talked into existence”. Over the last two decades, various authors have recast this core idea in the form of different concepts, arguing that organizations can be conceptualized as fundamentally shaped by discourse (e.g., Boje, Oswick, and Ford, 2004), narratives (e.g., Czarniawska, 1998), rhetorical tropes (e.g., Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen and Phillips, 2008), texts (Cooren, 2004; Kuhn, 2008), or talk (Boden, 1994).

The CCO perspective addresses one of the most fundamental issues in organization studies, that is, the ontological question: “What is an organization?” (Taylor and Van Every,

2000: ix). In response to this question, proponents of the CCO perspective argue that organizations essentially consist of communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Hence, the CCO perspective offers an alternative view on the common notion that organizations are primarily constituted by their members (e.g., March and Simon, 1958: 110). By conceptualizing organizations as unfolding and interlocking networks of communication processes (Taylor and van Every, 2000), the CCO perspective turns this common understanding of organization ‘inside out’ so-to-speak. It is through communication that organizations are created and sustained. To put it simply, according to this view, organizations do not consist of directors, managers, and other employees but arise from the interactions among their members or, more precisely, from the actual communication episodes these individuals are involved in.

In a most recent paper, Cooren et al. (2011) list structuration theory approaches by McPhee and colleagues (e.g., McPhee and Zaug, 2009), the work of 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’ in CCO thinking. 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: 20). Similarly, Luhmann (2000) grasps organizations as self-referential and interconnected events of communication. In his processual view of organizations, the perpetuation of communication becomes a matter of organizational continuation and survival. In this context, we need to consider that conversations, as the main “building blocks” of organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 7), are inherently ephemeral in character. As soon as they are uttered, they vanish (Hernes and

Bakken, 2003: 1522). Organizational continuation and survival then depends on whether or not ‘connectivity’ between dispersed communication events can be achieved; that is, whether or not such events can interconnect in a self-referential manner (Luhmann, 2000; McPhee and Zaug, 2009; Weick, 1995). This, in turn, corresponds with other CCO scholars’ emphasis 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: 1150). In a similar vein, Cooren and Fairhurst raise the question how local and ephemeral interactions are scaled up to longer-lasting and stabilized forms of organization: “It is this *source of stability* that needs to be unveiled” (2009: 123; emphasis in original).

In response to this question, authors of the Montréal School emphasize the importance of *non-human agency*: Non-human entities (e.g., text, tools, or other artifacts) are seen here as agents in their own right that have the capability to act, i.e., of making a difference (Cooren, 2006), by virtue of their mere presence and particular configurations; for instance, a sign at a restaurant’s entrance where a private party is held that stops you from entering. This is also referred to as *restance*, i.e., the “staying capacity” (Derrida, 1988), of texts and artifacts, i.e. their ability to transcend time and (in some cases also) space. While circumstantial factors may vary, such entities remain robust over time, as they become detached from their authors’ intentions and the context of their creation. With relation to organizations, one could say that, in effect, organizations come into existence by help of the various forms of non-human agency (see Latour, 1994), which allow the dislocation and consequently the perpetuation of the organizations’ existence. Non-human entities start to act *on behalf of* the organization and thus help to maintain its processual existence over time (Taylor and Cooren, 1997). In the same spirit, Cooren elaborates:

Different types of agencies are typically created and mobilized to fulfill organizing (to name just a few, organizational charts, contracts, ledgers, surveillance cameras, statuses, checklists, orders, memos, [etc.]). [...] Organizing can thus be understood as a hybrid phenomenon that requires the mobilization of entities [...] which contribute to the emergence and the enactment of the organized form. (Cooren, 2006: 83)

Taken together, the CCO perspective can be characterized by three main assumptions about how organizations and communication are related: First, by definition, the CCO view ascribes to communication a *constitutive* character. That is to say, communication is not only a means to an end (Axley, 1984), but it fundamentally constitutes our perception of social reality (Craig 1999). Accordingly, the CCO perspective rejects any container or production metaphor of organizations, in which organization precedes communication (Putnam et al., 1996). Instead, organizations are conceptualized as essentially consisting of communication episodes. Second, the CCO view emphasizes the *processual-emergent* and not fully determinable character of communication and, hence, also of organization (Taylor and van Every, 2000). In other words, communication processes cannot be completely and intentionally determined by individual actors. On the contrary, communicative practices can gain agency in their own right (see Cooren, 2006; Kuhn, 2008). Third and last, as a result of the *ephemeral* character of communicative episodes (Hernes and Bakken, 2003), organizations have to ensure that they perpetuate their communication, if they are not to disappear altogether. That is to say, they necessitate that every communication event calls forth and is linked to further communication events, which form and reform the organization over time (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009).



## **Towards a Constitutive View on CSR Communication**

After our brief introduction to the CCO perspective (Ashcraft et al. 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009) we can now readily apply this theoretical approach to the field of CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; Ihlen et al. 2011; May et al., 2007). We identify three main points where we believe the CCO view can yield crucial implications for this area of research. These points directly relate to the three main features of the CCO view we have outlined in the previous section, i.e., the (1) constitutive, (2) processual-emergent, and (3) ephemeral character of communication:

*First*, based on the idea that communication is *constitutive* for phenomena of organizing, the CCO perspective suggests focusing on the linkages and the interplay of internal and external communication (see Cheney and Christensen, 2001). In a container or production metaphor of the organization-communication relation (see Putnam et al., 1996), it makes sense to understand the organization either as a container in which communication processes *internally* occur or as a producer of *external* communication. However, if you imagine the organization as being first and foremost communicative in origin (see the isomorphic root metaphor; Putnam et al. 1996), then literally every communicative act that refers to the organization (be it internally or externally) can contribute to the organization's communicative constitution and start *to act on its behalf* (see Taylor and Cooren, 1997).

At the same time, the CCO perspective implies to grasp organizations as *polyphonic* in nature (Kornberger et al., 2006), i.e., as being collectively constituted by partly dissonant and contradicting communicative practices. Accordingly, CSR communication is merely *one* of various communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization and that evolve in continuous and fierce competition with one another (e.g., dominant corporate discourses on profitability; see Humphreys and Brown, 2008). At the same time, CSR communication is in itself subject to continuous contestation (Christensen and Cheney, 2011) and triggers multiple

forms of storytelling, narrations, and further efforts of sensemaking (see Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). The question then arises whether or not and, if yes, *which* interpretations of CSR communication can gain “authoritative character” in organizational communication, i.e. whether it is attributed legitimacy and power (Kuhn, 2008). Consequently, it is intriguing to study the interplay of the various polyphonic practices in a continuous struggle for meaning, recognition, and legitimacy (see Christensen et al. 2011). One major implication of this conceptualization is that CSR-related communicative practices can only gain this *authoritative* character if they become interconnected to the core building blocks of the communicative constitution of the organization, that is, according to Luhmann (2000), the ‘decision-communication’. In other words, if a corporation simply creates a satellite-style CSR department that lacks connectivity to the organization’s core communicative practices of decision-making, CSR communication is not integral part of the organization but rather needs to be seen as environmental to the organization as a communicative entity (in this context, see Luhmann, 2000: 65, on the organizational boundary that is maintained through decision-communication).

Nevertheless, CSR communication scholars who are inspired by the CCO perspective (e.g., Christensen et al. 2010) emphasize that even the most decoupled CSR communication practices can yield important consequences. The concept of decoupling refers to gap between an organization’s surface façade and its actual activities (see Meyer and Rowan, 1977). However, with their concept of “aspirational talk”, Christensen et al. (2010) highlight that the decoupling between an organizational self-representation as socially responsible corporate citizen in the public discourse and the actual communicative practices and decision-communications that constitute the organization is also potentially a powerful driver for 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: 461; emphases in original)

Seen from this perspective, even the most “greenwashed” forms of communication (see Laufer, 2003) can have *performative* character (see Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), in the sense that it causes pressure to create the very reality it refers to. Hence, it can generate at least a “creeping commitment” in the long run to develop dissonant communicative realities into further correspondence, i.e., by re-coupling or closer coupling of organizational activities to surface façades as expressed in aspirational talk (Haack, Schoeneborn and Wickert forthcoming). However, the crucial question arises whether decoupling is stable in the long run at all and under which conditions aspirational talk can lead to effects of re-coupling.

*Second*, the CCO perspective directs our attention to the *processuality and emergence* of organizations as phenomena that arise in and through communication (Taylor and van Every, 2011). The underlying processual ontology of the CCO view, i.e. that organizations essentially consists of a network of interconnected communicative processes, invites us to perceive not only large organizations or corporations as organizations but also most rudimentary forms of *organizing* (see Weick, 1979). In other words, CCO scholars reconstruct organizations from the bottom-up by asking how various local interactions “scale up” to form the organization as a collective phenomenon (Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009). Consequently, CCO widens our view of what an organization is to phenomena of “partial organizations”, as

well, a concept introduced by Ahrne and Brunsson (2011). The authors delineate five characteristics that classically define organizations, that is, (1) membership, (2) hierarchy, (3) rules, (4) monitoring, and (5) sanctions. *Membership* refers to an organization's ability to define who will be allowed to join the organization as employee, citizen, or corporate member, i.e., by demarcating the boundary between inclusion and exclusion (see Luhmann 2000: 390). *Hierarchy* refers to the asymmetrical right of some organizational members of imposing on others to comply with central decisions. *Rules* come into play when organizations issue commands that create expectations of complying with them for decision-making. *Monitoring* then refers to an organization's right to observe if organizational members (or external parties) follow its rules or immediate commands. Finally, *sanctions* are used by organizations to either positively or negatively react to organizational members based on the observed compliance with its rules or commands. Whereas "complete" organizations (e.g., a multi-national corporation or governmental bureaucracies) have access to all these five features, phenomena of "partial organization" make "use of less than all organizational elements" (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011: 84).

If we relate these considerations to CSR communication, this yields two main implications: (1) CSR communication is not only a matter of large-scale formal organizations (e.g., multi-national corporations), but as a communicative activity it can also itself represent the constitutive basis for the emergence of rudimentary, local, and temporary forms of organizing (e.g., a CSR standard). Accordingly, it would be more suitable to widen the idea of CSR to OSR, i.e., *organizational social responsibility*; (2) CSR communication itself gives rise to broad 'zoology' of organizational phenomena (see Waddock, 2008) which tend to be partial in nature (see Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011). Consider, for instance, the Equator Principles (EP), a CSR standard in the global financial industry which binds participating banks to base their money-lending decisions to large infrastructure projects on a list of ten social and environmental criteria. In the terminology of Ahrne and Brunsson, the EP (at least

in their initial form since their initiation in 2003) would need to be seen as extremely *partial* form of organizing, given that the standard is essentially a set of rules which, however, features neither the ability to decide on membership, nor any hierarchy among members, nor any monitoring or sanction mechanisms to enforce these rules. Only very recently, continuous communicative pressure by NGOs has given rise to a further ‘completion’ of the partial organization called “EP Association”, i.e., by introducing governance mechanisms (hierarchy), membership rules (membership), or measurements of transparency (monitoring and potentially also sanctions) (see Schoeneborn, Kuhn and Haack, 2011). To conclude, from a CCO view it is intriguing to study how organizational phenomena that are primarily constituted by CSR communication differ from other organizational phenomena. As Christensen and Cheney (2011: 495) have persuasively argued, CSR represents a complex field of continuous contestation and meaning negotiation. Therefore, it is particularly exciting to explore processes of storytelling and meaning negotiation that contribute to the further completion of partial organizations which are constituted by CSR communication (see Schoeneborn et al., 2011).

*Third*, and most crucially, based on the idea of the fundamental *ephemeral* and precarious character of communication (Cooren et al., 2011; Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009; Hernes and Bakken, 2003), scholars of the CCO view stress that organizations as communicative entities are stabilized *non-human entities* (e.g., artifacts, texts, processes, scripts, routines) that “act” on its behalf. Agency is defined here in comparably broad sense as an entity’s capability *to make a difference* (Cooren, 2006). Agency, however, also implies responsibility. Consequently, CSR communication would need to take into account not only the agency and inherent responsibility of individual human actors but also of non-human actors that in many cases cannot be traced back anymore to a particular human creator or author who could be held accountable for (Kuhn, 2008). In the Luhmannian variant of the CCO perspective (see Cooren et al., 2011; Schoeneborn, 2011) communicative practices can

similarly be characterized as agents in their own right. Taken together, CCO widens our notion of responsibility to what non-human actors do (see Cooren, 2006).

Let us illustrate these theoretical considerations with an example: A consulting firm may feature the established practice among consultants to have excessive parties that are paid from the expenses account which is billed to the client. The costs of vodka bottles are simply hidden in a lump sum that the client has to pay for the consultants' services. New consultants 'learn' this practice from recurrently participating in these events. If the practice remains unquestioned and is simply taken-for-granted, these 'newbies' may contribute to the practice's reproduction in the future. However, the practice of course can be seen as unethical or at least morally doubtful from a client's point of view. The typical reaction if someone will scandalize this practice (and only if the firm will see the urge to inhibit it) would be to identify individual human scapegoats and to sanction them. However, who can be said to have 'invented' such the practice in a first place? In this context, the CCO view underlines the emergence of communicative practices beyond individual human agency. This of course does not deny the responsibility of individuals' actions. However, in this context, the CCO widens this notion of agency and responsibility: It points our attention to considering also the very responsibility that lies in the communicative practice itself (which is perpetuated from one communicative event to the next, what is partly independent from which individual particularly contributed to it; Luhmann, 2000). Accordingly, CSR communication would also need to take into account the various established and institutionalized practices, texts, artifacts, etc. that collectively constitute the organization, especially if they lack a particular and identifiable authorship (see Kuhn, 2008), and allow them to be placed under societal scrutiny. Hence, CCO implies a much more holistic CSR communication that acknowledges *both* human *and* non-human agency. Table 1 sums up main differences between a transmission view and the constitutive view on CSR communication in form of a comparative analysis.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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## **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, we have argued that a significant part of the existing literature on CSR communication (e.g., Du et al., 2010) primarily applies a mechanistic understanding of communication (see Axley, 1984). In contrast, by drawing on the emerging CCO perspective (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009), we propose a *constitutive* view on CSR communication. Our application of the CCO view to CSR communication yields three main findings: First, CSR communication represents only one of several communicative practices that collectively constitute the organization and that evolve in fierce competition with each other. Second, CSR communication is not only a matter of large-scale formal organizations (e.g., multi-national corporations), but as a communicative activity it can itself also form the constitutive basis for the emergence of rudimentary, local, and temporary forms of organizing. It can then be fruitful to further explore the particularities of organizational phenomena that are grounded in this type of communicative practices (vis-à-vis other practices). Third, proponents of the CCO view (e.g., Cooren 2006) assume that the organization as communicative entity is constituted and stabilized by various non-human entities (e.g., artifacts, texts, processes, scripts, routines) that start to “act” on its behalf. Accordingly, CSR communication would need to take also into account the agency and responsibility of such forms of *non-human* entities, which in some cases even lack concrete individual human creators who could be held accountable for (see Kuhn, 2008).

We contribute to the existing literature on three levels: First, we contribute to *CSR communication* by proposing an alternative theory lens that is grounded in a constitutive notion of communication (Craig, 1999). This view allows for taking the emergent and

processual character of communication into account: Instead of a ‘one-way street’ (e.g., simply issuing press releases that report a corporation’s philanthropic activities), a constitutive view instead implies to perceive CSR communication as a complex process of meaning negotiation. Accordingly, also the role of employees in charge of CSR communication would need to change from mere info dissemination to sensemaking and translation (e.g., translating issues addressed by NGOs in a way that they become also comprehensible within the firm and vice-versa). Second, we contribute to research on CSR more generally: The constitutive view implies ascribing to communication a primacy in studying organizational phenomena (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Consequently, communication is not only a function to be fulfilled by a (satellite-style) CSR communication department but is a holistic endeavor that should encompass the organization as a whole. In other words, each employee (from the CEO to ones on the lowest pay-grades) would need to be seen as (potential) actors of CSR communication. We believe that this aspect is particularly important in the age of social media and employees’ engagement in external communication activities, for instance, by means of blogging or ‘tweeting’ (i.e. via the microblog Twitter) (Capriotti, 2011). Third, our conceptual paper also allows to for expanding the *CCO perspective*: Up until today, there is a lack of studies from a CCO view that address interorganizational linkages (e.g., between a corporation and its various stakeholders). One of the few CCO scholars who has explicitly addressed issues of this kind is Kuhn (2008; Koschmann, Kuhn & Pfarrer, forthcoming). We contribute to Kuhn and colleagues’ line of thinking by showing that organizations are inherently embedded in communicative interrelations and continuous meaning negotiations with other organizations. Importantly, we assume that this finding could represent a fruitful point of connecting the CCO perspective with other communication-centered approaches that are more normative in character and emphasize the importance of deliberative dialogues for the legitimation of corporations in a globalized world (e.g., Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).



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Table 1: Comparison of the transmission and the constitutive model of communication: Implications for organizational communication in general and CSR communication in particular

		<b>Transmission Model of Communication</b>	<b>Constitutive Model of Communication</b>
<b>Organizational Communication in General</b>	<b>Definition of communication</b>	Communication as channel through which information is transmitted from sender to receiver	Communication as emergent, dynamic, and precarious process of meaning negotiation
	<b>Metaphorical notion of organization-communication relation</b>	Container (communication occurs in organizations) or production (organization produces communication)	Isomorphism (communication activity <i>is</i> the organization)
	<b>Focus</b>	(Primarily) external communication	Interplay of internal and external communication
	<b>Direction and linearity</b>	Unidirectional, linear	Multidirectional, non-linear
	<b>Voice</b>	Homophonic (i.e., speaking with <i>one</i> voice; ideal of integrated communication)	Polyphonic (i.e., speaking with partly dissonant, contradicting voices)
<b>CSR Communication in Particular</b>	<b>Relation of talk and action (issue of decoupling)</b>	Talk <i>does not</i> equal action; therefore, decoupling can be a stable condition as long as it does not become externally visible	Talk <i>is</i> action (performativity of speech acts); therefore, decoupling is not likely to be stable, ‘aspirational talk’ as driver of organizational change
	<b>Relation of CSR communication and organization</b>	CSR communication as one function of (primarily large) corporations	CSR communication either as <i>one</i> of various discursive practices that collectively constitute the organization; or, CSR communication as <i>the</i> constitutive element of rudimentary and partial forms of organizing
	<b>Scope of agency and responsibility</b>	Focus on individual human agency and responsibility	Widened focus on the agency and responsibility of individual human actors <i>and</i> non-human entities, e.g., communicative practices, texts, and tools