The State of CSR Communication Research: A Summary and Future Direction

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special issue of Public Relations Journal on corporate social responsibility communication sponsored by the Arthur W. Page Center. Effective CSR communication is built on knowledge of audience interests and expectations, optimal channels of communication, impacts of communication on publics, and ethical practices for communicating information. The article discusses past and current practices of CSR communication as well as future trends for research and communication. It then introduces the four research articles in the issue which address timely and important issues of CSR communication.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, sustainability, public relations, CSR communication, Arthur W. Page Center

INTRODUCTION

From global corporations to local businesses, companies around the world are communicating about corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to try to educate stakeholders about their contributions to society and the environment. From JetBlue promoting its Soar with Reading project, to Pedigree raising money to feed sheltered dogs, to Patagonia giving grants for environmental programs, the topics and methods of communication vary widely. Some companies appear to be strategic in their development and communication of CSR programs, and others appear to choose an "anything goes" approach to communication and program development. Research suggests that building a successful CSR communication means answering many questions including, what kind of information do individuals want to know about CSR initiatives, what are the best ways to reach audiences with CSR information, and what impact does communication of CSR programs have on audiences? These are questions that both the professional field and academic world are working to answer.

The Arthur W. Page Center recently commissioned 10 studies on this topic, and some of the best work resulting from the research is presented here. This special issue on

corporate social responsibility communication attempts to answer questions about CSR through surveys, experiments, and content analysis studies of corporate communication and public responses to it. The results help clarify who is looking for CSR information and how they wish to receive it, but the findings also raise more questions about the importance of ethics in the presentation of CSR information.

This introductory article explores the purpose of CSR communication and offers future trends for study, as background for the articles published in this issue. It then summarizes the four research articles and explains their value to our knowledge of the field.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Corporate social responsibility as a business practice includes addressing legal, ethical, and economic responsibilities of an organization in relationship to key stakeholders and society (Carroll, 1979, 1999; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004)). Falck and Heblich (2007) define CSR as "a voluntary corporate commitment to exceed the explicit and implicit obligations imposed on a company by society's expectations of conventional corporate behavior" (p. 247). CSR practices are often understood to be discretionary acts by organizations to give back to communities and societies that have supported them (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Although social responsibility by a company can have a positive impact in its bottom line (Joyner & Payne, 2002), CSR actions are primarily considered to be ethical because of their positive impact on employees, communities, the environment, and society.

CSR programs can take on many forms including philanthropy, corporate social advocacy, partnerships with advocacy groups, and sustainable business practices (Kotler & Lee, 2005). A recent study by Cone (2013) found that CSR has become more than a good strategy for business; it is now considered an expectation of business by the public. And, the issues that companies are expected to take on are increasingly complex, including social political issues and environmental problems.

CSR COMMUNICATION

It has long been known that corporate social responsibility communication is a critical part of effective CSR (Manheim & Pratt, 1986). Research has found that communication about CSR can lead to stronger relationships with publics (Hall, 2006), greater legitimacy (Du & Vieira, 2012), and more positive attitudes among stakeholders (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). At the same time, CSR activities can lead to skepticism, but how companies communicate their CSR activities may determine the degree to which the public accepts the programs as legitimate (Kim, in press).

The public's beliefs about corporate contributions to society are not particularly encouraging. Cone (2013) shared the following key findings from its study:

- "22% of consumers believe companies have made significant positive impact on social and environmental issues

- 27% believes consumers themselves can have significant positive impact through their purchases"

This is the environment in which companies communicate today. Consumers appear to be skeptical about corporate claims of "doing good" for society and the environment. The challenge will be overcoming objectives and finding ways to connect CSR initiatives in a meaningful way with the interests of society. A look at the past and future of CSR communication offers some insights.

HISTORY AND FUTURE OF CSR COMMUNICATION

In the early days, communicators struggled to make a case for communicating corporate social responsibility (Manheim & Pratt, 1986) and to identify the role of public relations in it (Heath & Ryan, 1989). Later, communication research examined how CSR can make an important contribution to corporate reputation (Lewis, 2003), and the focus slowly evolved from one-way communication that framed messages and primed audiences to two-way communication that engaged with them (Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007; Dawkins, 2004; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Wang, 2007).

As we move into the next phase of research and practice about CSR communication, corporate communications practitioners need to build a case for more sophisticated CSR communication (Chaudhri, 2014). This will come in part as companies begin to track and share the value of their programs for the audiences they serve and the ecological settings in which they do business, rather than focus on the benefits that the programs bring to the organization.

Another focus for future research and practice should be global CSR communication. To date, most studies have examined communication in only one culture or country. Future studies will need to look at cross-cultural application of CSR and differences in CSR communication across borders. As more companies work in multiple regions of the world, we need to gain a deeper understanding of global corporate social responsibility communication. Early calls for this focused on CSR reporting (Golob & Bartlett, 2007), but the need is broad, and it is particularly important in emerging economies, where CSR is still burgeoning (Amaladoss & Manohar, 2013; Chaudhri & Wang, 2007).

And, finally, CSR communication will need to adjust to the trend toward sustainability as a key business strategy. Communicators should consider the way CSR and sustainability communication are coming together and changing the focus of CSR programs (Bortree, 2011). The increased importance of doing business today in a way that ensures the future of the organization will impact the way CSR programs are created, implemented, and communicated.

Considering these issues and future trends, the following section summarizes the research reports found in this special issue on CSR communication and identifies that value that each bring.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH REPORTS

The first research article, written by Sora Kim and Mary Ann Ferguson, takes on some of the core questions about how and what to communicate about CSR. The research identifies the demographics of key audiences for CSR information as well as the types of information that audiences seek. The article, titled "Public Expectations of CSR Communication: What and How to Communicate CSR", also offers accessible information about where people seek CSR information and who they trust to deliver the information. In the end, the article offers a roadmap to companies for developing and delivering CSR information in a strategic way. Its rigorous methodology and practical application make it extremely useful for the public relations field.

The second article notes that companies are beginning to use their public platforms to make statements on societal issues, such as gay marriage, abortion, gun control, and others. What are the consequences for companies who take a stand on one side of the debate? Melissa Dodd and Dustin Supa, in their article "Conceptualizing and Measuring 'Corporate Social Advocacy' Communication: Examining the Impact on Corporate Financial Performance" illustrate the consequences of taking a stand when not all members of your publics agree with you. Through a series of experiments, they find potential financial impact for companies who make public statements of this type, but that is only part of the story. This article introduces new concepts and finds a way to measure the impact of a phenomenon that we have seen play out publicly in the media.

The third article takes on the tricky topic of CSR for nonprofit organizations. In an interesting study that interviewed nonprofit communication professionals, Richard Waters and Holly Ott explored the opinions and experiences of nonprofit organizations with social responsibility initiatives. The article, titled "Corporate Social Responsibility and the Nonprofit Sector: Assessing the Thoughts and Practices across Three Nonprofit Subsectors", questions whether CSR exists in the nonprofit sector, and, if so, how do the nonprofits handle CSR for themselves? The article identifies the challenges that nonprofits face when raising awareness of their own responsible actions, when the issues are not related to their mission. The study also explores the term 'corporate social responsibility' within the non-profit sector and finds that study participants express some discomfort with the term. The authors acknowledged that a new term may be needed, a finding that some may question. In the end, the study identifies important issues that nonprofits will need to address as society increasingly scrutinizes the social and environmental responsibility of organizations.

The final article, titled "How Corporations Manage Industry and Consumer Expectations via the CSR Report", advances important questions about the ethics of framing corporate social responsibility material. The study begins with a content analysis that examines the substance of CSR reports and raises concerns about how companies are presenting their activities. It follows with a survey of audiences to find the degree to which content matches public expectations. The places in which companies' communication matches (and doesn't match) the needs and interests of publics

provides insights into both the need for more transparency but also the push from publics to focus on societal good.

Together, the articles range from practical application to philosophical analysis and along the way they cover new ground and help clarify some of what we already know. The final product is an excellent combination of topics that can help the profession in relevant and useful ways. I was pleased to edit this special issue, and I appreciate the hard work of the authors and the assistance of Public Relations Journal editor, Rob Wakefield, and Randi Mason of PRSA.

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