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3.2

The imperative needs of dialogue between CSR departments and PR practitioners

Empirical evidence from Spain

Isabel Ruiz-Mora¹ and Jairo Lugo-Ocando

Introduction

Recent research carried out in Spain² suggests that corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments tend to downplay existing and potential contributions from public relations professionals. Accordingly, public relations practitioners are not sufficiently involved in the conceptualization, designed and implementation of CSR programs.^{3,4} This lack of input from PR professionals, in our view, accounts for some of the most important operational deficiencies and accountability deficits of CSR programs. To be sure, public relations practitioners' involvement in CSR has traditionally been limited to assistance in the production of the annual reports^{5,6} or just seeking ways of using CSR as a peripheral activity for reputation management purposes.⁷ This has become bluntly obvious in current times, when social media and interactive technologies are re-configuring the relationship and landscape between companies, institutions and their stakeholders. It is in the face of this scenario of transformational communications that many CSR departments within large, medium and small organizations find themselves deprived from the necessary expertise to address the challenges of the digital age.

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This chapter examines how corporate social responsibility (CSR) engages with public relations (PR) and other forms of professional communication in the context of the digital age in Spain. The main research question asks why CSR practitioners failed to understand that political communication and stakeholder engagement are at the core of what they do? Consequently, the authors have looked at the top companies listed in the IBEX 35 in Spain, which happen to be those that have invested more resources in CSR in that country. The research included the triangulation of the different sets of data by combining semi-structured interviews with the analysis of annual reports, communication strategies and digital ethnographic observations of the digital platforms (websites and social networks). The overall research suggests that there is scarcity of public relations practitioners responsible for the formulation or communication of CSR policies in major Spanish companies, both in digital and non-digital spaces. The way we interpret these results is that there is an important gap between the awareness of CSR departments in relation to communication needs and the view they have about the ability of communication professionals to deliver these goals. Consequently, communication strategies become peripheral and performative exercises within the organization, rather than being considered a core part of CSR.¶

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Indeed, many of those managing CSR, for example, still see annual reports as the main tool for transparency and accountability in relation to the performance and the politics of the companies and organizations for which they work.⁸ Consequently, not only these reports continue to be at the core of reputation management in relation to CSR, but they also continue to consume a disproportionate amount of time and resources from the organization. All of which have meant neglecting other areas of public engagement such as dialogue building with stakeholders in times of increasing digitalization, interconnectivity and interactivity. The end result is that CSR continues to be mostly a ‘performative exercise’,^{9 10} one that fails to engage with stakeholders and the public in general in the boarder sense.

Moreover, in this digital era, when stakeholders seem to be more proactive and constantly demanding and looking for information¹¹ regarding the organizations performance and wider impact upon society, some of the most traditional approaches towards CSR have become outdated or at least insufficient to comply with normative requirements regarding transparency and accountability. Indeed, the increasing use by stakeholders, NGOs, activists and journalists of social media and other interactive communication technologies present important challenges and opportunities that do not currently seem to be properly addressed by CSR departments in Spain.

To be sure, digital platforms and all their applications are creating new ways in which stakeholders, pressure groups and the public at large are engaging with the organizations and companies, flattening traditional hierarchical relations and bringing about a further degree of complexity. Contrary to the past, an organization cannot decide nowadays to restrict its channels of communication nor predict with certainty the ultimate outcomes of its engagement strategy. Organizations no longer can avoid public criticism of their brands on Facebook,¹² and people can share on Twitter or Instagram pictures about the effects of their commercial activities on the

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environment, upload a video on YouTube of a major corporation that can wipe out the share price value in seconds or create a WhatsApp group to mobilize local people in favor or against that organization. All in all, the digital era has brought about a forced reality of hectic and complex engagement for all companies and organizations from around the globe,¹³ which now operate in the context of the so-called ‘risk society’.¹⁴

It is because of this context of increasing interconnectivity and risk that CSR has to be understood and examined in terms of the larger spectrum of communicative action theory.¹⁵ Despite this, many of those studying, conducting and implementing CSR programs continue to display a lack of engagement with areas such as political communication and professional communication. Indeed, CSR tends to be seen and treated from a theoretical perspective and an empirical standpoint as an empty concept – loosely based on moral communication – which is “filled with different meanings”.¹⁶ It is a concept that in practice tends to accommodate to the strategic priorities of each organization and it is often devoid of wider societal considerations and critical thinking.

Moreover, the prevalent meanings given to CSR by practitioners tend to be articulated without a proper contextualization within political communication. This is a gap that we ourselves have found among practitioners in the case of Spain, as we observed the gaps between the communication requirements of modern CSR and its actual engagement with the organization’s own departments of PR and public affairs.¹⁷ This, we argue, is not only due to managerial perception towards what PR is and does (or in that effect what it can do for CSR) but also fundamentally a product of a misconception of what CSR is about in this day and age.

This all is aggravated by the very naïve assumptions around the role of social media and digital technologies in the practices of CSR and PR. These assumptions, we found, tend to

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embrace a techno-determinist view that ‘symmetrical communication’¹⁸ can be achieved by pure technological means, while downplaying the role of human agency and political context. According to this premise, the new technologies themselves would facilitate a process of dialogue and democratization of corporate communication and enable further accountability of corporate actions. A view, of course, that tends to ignore issues such history and organizational prerogatives.

Instead, as we suggest here, the configuration of new ‘media ecology’ for PR¹⁹ has exacerbated in many cases the fundamental dilemma in CSR; its prevalent functionalistic assumption that is there to address issues on the periphery of the organization and that it should be subordinated to managerial prerogatives, which is something that public relations practice also assumed for years in its own deontological realm, but that many now have come to question.^{20 21} By doing this, CSR ends up reacting to issues management and reputation management, rather than using the new technologies to constitute itself as a space for stakeholders, the public and the organization to deliberate on equal terms.

It is because of this that we propose to examine how CSR engages with PR and other forms of professional communication in the context of the digital age as an urgent need. The chapter is based on an empirical study investigating, why do CSR practitioners fail to understand that political communication and stakeholder engagement are at the core of what they do? In order to answer this question, we have carried out semi-structured interviews with those in charge of CSR in the top Spanish organization and companies. We also included the analysis of communication strategies, annual reports and most commonly used digital platforms among these companies.

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Our overall suggestion is that CSR needs to engage with professional communication in the same way that natural science organizations and researchers have been engaging with professional communications over the past few decades.²² To us this benchmarking is urgently needed to enable CSR departments to develop their full potential in an age in which virtual and interactive communications foster meta-geographic communities around the organizations. However, this engagement cannot be carried out just in the traditional terms of ‘communicative action’,²³ that is, as propaganda (or pure dissemination of messages).

To be sure, CSR and PR departments can no longer be fixate with issues of propaganda and reputation, but instead, they need to advance towards establishing and consolidating horizontal relational networks that bring about true accountability and dialogue between the organization and the stakeholders. To do so, CSR departments will have to embrace professional communication and place it, as social practice, at the core of its own activities. Only in that manner, we argue, can CSR departments use the new technologies to create spaces for a non-hierarchical dialogue between organizations and the rest of society.

Failed mutual engagement

The professional definitions of PR^{24, 25, 26} and CSR^{27, 28} are closely related. This is because accountability to the public is a capital premise for both,²⁹ as they are seen as an opportunity for transparency and accountability in the face of managing relations between the organization and its stakeholders. Otherwise, as some authors point out, CSR and PR efforts are in danger of becoming just a ‘greenwashing reputation’ exercise.^{30, 31} This point has been embraced by several authors. Gonzalez-Herrero, for example, studies this relation from a crisis

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communication perspective and argues how responsible companies are in a stronger position to avoid crisis when they are managing the relations with their public in a proactive manner, particularly in relation to issues management.³²

Castillo-Esparcia, on the other hand, has examined this relation from the need to achieve equality among stakeholders, the public and organizations and the necessity to recognize each other. For him a “permanent dialogue with the publics”, where all the stakeholders are participating in the decision-making process, is crucial in modern times.³³ L’Etang, also follows a similar approach when she affirms that PR and CSR are closely linked as professional disciplines as they both are strategic for the organization.³⁴ She states that PR implies communication and exchange of ideas to generate a change in the organization,³⁵ while issues management is related with CSR, because emerging issues normally have a social background.³⁶

Moreover, Daugherty considers public relations practitioners as the “corporate conscience” suggesting that “public relations are the practice of social responsibility”.³⁷ This concept of ‘corporate conscience’ may sound moral and seductive, maybe because of the idealistic role given to PR as a peacemaker, breaking the barriers between organizations and publics.³⁸ However, as L’Etang cautiously reminds us, in reality these ‘conscience efforts’ end up focusing, too often, on protecting the organization’s reputation from external threats³⁹ rather than providing organizational accountability to publics and stakeholders.

Putting L’Etang’s well-reasoned reservations to one side, there are nevertheless very convincing arguments to support the incorporation of public relations professionals in CSR policy planning and execution,^{40 41} particularly in an era in which information and communication technologies are fostering an extended realm of influence and social

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responsibilities for all organizations. Daugherty, in fact, regrets the limited participation of public relations professionals in the design and implementation of CSR, since its functions,

are increasingly being placed in the hands of others individuals because many public relations practitioners are unprepared to handle the responsibilities of continuously monitoring attitudes and expectations of stakeholders, preparing executives to develop strong relationships with stakeholders and truly understanding the relationship between and organization and its many constituents.⁴²

Contrary to this view, Signitzer and Prexl, in their own research about sustainable communication, stated that “public relations practitioners do have the necessary expertise and competence to communicate on issues of corporate sustainability and CSR”. This, according to them, happens especially in the area of sustainability issues, where “professional communication skills are urgently needed”.⁴³ In this sense, these authors state that CSR and PR must have a close relationship in the organization, while advising that CSR and professional communication managers should work closely together.

This last is even more the case in a scenario in which CSR departments not only need to communicate what they do but are required to integrate communities and stakeholders in general into the process of design and implementation of organizational policy. To do so, one should ask: who is better placed than communicational professionals? Who is capable and has sound expertise in dealing with external and internal publics? Who would be better placed to develop the relational platform for CSR department than those who know how to create content and develop social media provisions in ways that are accessible and relevant for the variety of publics and stakeholders?

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Having said that, CSR and PR departments have rarely walked hand in hand.^{44 45} Furthermore, different organizations have different approaches to CSR. Some of them assume that CSR is a unidirectional exercise and they decide when, what and how they communicate with the public in relation to their own organizational efforts. They practice an approach to CSR from business-centrism,⁴⁶ one that maintains a relation with the publics from the economic/profit point of view.⁴⁷ These organizations tend to altogether overlook stakeholder approaches to CSR;^{48 49} therefore, they do not take into account approaches that perhaps would allow them to understand their impact upon society and solve more structural issue.^{50 51}

Overall, as some authors suggest, public relations practitioners lead or are involved in CSR efforts, even in those cases in which organizations depart from the stakeholders' perspective.⁵² In the cases in which public relations practitioners are not involved, dialogue seems to be absent from the communication process relating to CSR, which tends to be instead unidirectional and hierarchical. Therefore, any possibility of fulfilling the potential of social media and digital technologies to develop a relational platform with the variety of publics and stakeholders of the organization is mostly hindered by the inability of both disciplines to talk to each other.

Social media and dialogue

There are, however, many cases from around the world when organizations have undertaken a distinctive approach, one defined by 'open and interactive communication'.⁵³ In these cases, this relation of dialogue with the stakeholders and the public becomes an opportunity for organizations to use CSR programs to create spaces for mutual understanding and accountability.

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This model to which Grunig and Hunt⁵⁴ referred to as ‘symmetrical’ assumes that the public has some effect upon the organization’s policy and actions. In it, stakeholders can be engaged and take part in shaping and evaluating the agenda of the organization, offering the possibility of implementing a creative problem-solving process⁵⁵ in which the public in general and stakeholders in particular become active actors.

In this sense, social media represents an opportunity to initiate transcendental organizational changes. By introducing new ways of dialogue these organizations can foster a relational approach that would help them achieve a two-way symmetrical public relations model.⁵⁶ However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss whether this is really happening on the ground yet; moreover, there is already a comprehensive body of literature that has presented a set of criticisms toward some of the assumptions around symmetrical models of communication.^{57, 58, 59} As Yang and Kent have highlighted in their own research about social media use in Fortune 500 corporations, the evidence indicates that social media is still mostly used as one-way messaging tools by most organizations, rather than as relationship building tools.⁶⁰

Likewise, let us be clear in our own position, it is not the technologies themselves that have catalyzed dialogue and relational networks in those cases where it has effectively happened but the fact that these organizations decided to embrace a model that privileges dialogue as they consider it “an efficient and ethical way for organizations to communicate with their publics in the social network and maintain corporate legitimacy”.⁶¹ This is not to say that information and communication technologies have not played any role whatsoever. On the contrary, it is precisely because of them that dialogical spaces have become so important nowadays, but rather they have had a ‘facilitating’ role. This because the age of digital and interactive media has

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incentivized new types of behaviors, both from the publics and the organizations. As Charest, Bouffard and Zajmovic state,

The listening strategy⁶² . . . assumes that new technologies, and particularly the Internet, make it possible to invent new ways of sharing knowledge faster. It is therefore important to listen to the conversations that take place on social platforms and analyze them in order to stay abreast of public opinion and, through this, to recruit collaborators, or even create partnerships with influencers.⁶³

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In the digital age, stakeholders are more active in their behavior towards companies and organizations and organizations are constantly under pressure to maintain their reputation and strengthen their brands⁶⁴ in a way that was not that common in the past. Social media has changed the way people relate and participate in their communities by allowing them to create and share content. The new digital media ecology has reinforced the ability of stakeholders to express their identity, provoking co-creation, and also facilitating the stakeholders' identification with the company and with the community.⁶⁵ Indeed, this new media ecosystem – also referred to as new 'media ecology'⁶⁶ – is creating further demands for transparency, accountability and dialogue. The public in general and stakeholders in particular can now manage their own relations with the organizations while these last can no longer avoid interaction or prevent public exposure.

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Therefore, what we want to rescue from this 'symmetrical' approach is not its techno-deterministic assumptions but its premise that communication professionals need to truly engage with horizontal platforms to foster dialogue and that fact that the approach aspires to see the organization, the stakeholders and the public at large as equals. CSR departments have to face to the fact that public relations professionals have become increasingly important in "creating,

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cultivating, and managing online brand communities, as well as of establishing and maintaining the relationships created by active, engaged publics”;⁶⁷ something that is becoming increasingly important.

Indeed, if building, maintaining and enhancing relationships with the stakeholders has always been a function of public relations professionals, this has now extended to a global scale⁶⁸ thanks to the new technologies, which facilitate global interconnectivity and exposure. This can create, nevertheless, a ‘risky environment’⁶⁹ for those companies with CSR programs that stand away from transparency and a stakeholder approach. Research in the context of Spain indicates that CSR organizational programs that are not managed by public relations professionals tend to present important deficiencies when trying to engage stakeholders into the process of corporate decision-making (this might be of course a deliberated effort, but it is not a sensible strategy).⁷⁰

In the majority of these cases, dialogue is absent and CSR becomes a cynical and futile performative exercise to preserve reputation and branding at all cost, with subsequent backlash on the long term. The recent history of CSR is filled with the graveyards of those who failed in the attempt to reach out by means of unsatisfactory compromises between the corporative prerogatives and societal demands.⁷¹ It is precisely in this context in which we need to raise the question about why companies are not exploring and incorporating the ability of public relations professionals to promote this engagement and why it has become such a missed opportunity, particularly in the light of the rise of social media and digital technologies?

Research approaches

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To answer these questions, we have carried out semi-structured interviews to those in charge of CSR in top Spanish organization of companies, as well as public relations professionals also working for them. We also included the examination of communication strategies, annual reports and most commonly used digital platforms among these companies. In doing so, we wanted to explore why particular companies and organizations are not making full use of the possibilities offered by the new media technologies. The key thesis is that the lack of communication professional, by which we mean individuals who have studied and prepared themselves to design and implement communication policy within organizations, in CSR departments hinders their ability to appropriate and use the relatively new wave of communication technologies.

To do so, we looked at the top companies listed in the IBEX 35 in Spain, which happen to be the ones that have invested more resources in CSR in that country. Our sample, however, included only 28 companies in total. This because one company (Acerol Mittal) cannot really be considered Spanish, while six others declined to take part in the study (Inditex, Bankia -Caja Madrid-, Amadeus IT Holding, Grifols, EbroFoods, Bolsas y Mercados Españoles). At the time of the fieldwork, the companies in our study included, among others, Telefónica, Santander, Iberdrola, BBVA, Repsol, Gas Natural, Abertis Infraestructuras, Ferrovial, ACS Construcción, Caixa Bank, Red Eléctrica Corporación, Banco Popular, Iberia, Banco Sabadell, Acciona, Mapfre, Enagas, Bankinter, Indra A, FCC, Endesa, Técnicas Reunidas, OHL, Mediaset España, Acerinox, Abengoa, and Gamesa y Sacyr Vallehermoso.

We triangulated the data to examine a) the relationship between CSR and professional communication and b) how these companies engage with stakeholders and publics in general by means of digital platforms. In so doing, we were trying to better understand not only the existing gaps between moral communication, normative claims and CSR practice, but also we intend to

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seek ways in which this gap can be addressed. We are fully aware of the limitations that these types of approaches carried out, particularly in relation to the performative aspects of the semi-structured interviews (that is, between what people say they do and what they actually do). We triangulated the different sets of data by combining semi-structured interviews with the close reading of annual reports, communication strategies and digital ethnographic observations of the digital platforms (such as websites and social networks).

What the data say

Firstly, we map the professional profile of the CSR departments of these companies. They are, on average, small, as 71% of them have five or less employees. There is also a particular imbalance in terms of gender, despite the fact that 93% of their employees are women, 61% of the managers are men. This, however, is not different from the national trends in Spain in which similar levels of inequality can be observed ^{72, 73} in other areas of these same organizations. Secondly, almost a third of all employees in these CSR departments have a business background (32%), followed by environmental (16%), then information/computing and communication – but none in PR – (14%), quality and engineering (9%) and, finally, human resources (6%).

Overall, the semi-structured interviews suggest that part of the activities of CSR managers in the companies included in the study relate to PR. However, those interviewed confirmed that most of these managers do not have any professional training in PR or background in professional communication. They are, in other words, professionals who lack adequate training around professional communication, which is – paradoxically – an area that they themselves recognize as ‘key’ part of their own work. Only in one case did we find a person

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with a communications background. This was, nevertheless, someone with a background in journalism not in PR.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews also highlight the low opinion that CSR managers have of public relations professionals: 64% of them think they “do not need any professional communication expertise in their departments”. They justify this because 1) their companies have already a general communication department and 2) communication in CSR is only for “doing reports” so “you can outsource” that task. It is worth highlighting that there were specific cases in which CSR managers had opted to incorporate temporarily communications professionals in their departments. They did so, according to the interviews, for two main reasons, 1) to manage relations with stakeholders and 2) to communicate CSR policies.

Nevertheless, our data shows that there is scarcity of public relations practitioners responsible for the formulation or communication of CSR policies in major Spanish companies. When we asked about the ideal professional profile for a CSR manager, not in one single case were public relations professionals mentioned. Moreover, one of the managers went out of his way to say that he “never would choose a public relations practitioner to fill that post”. This reluctance to employ public relations professionals happens, despite the fact that 46% of the staff in CSR departments seems well aware of the links with communications departments as ‘strategic’. Moreover, 64% of the interviewees think that “communication” is “fundamental” for CSR programs.

The way we interpret these results is that there is an important gap between the awareness of CSR departments in relation to communication needs and the view they have about the ability of communication professionals to deliver these goals. These findings correspond to similar studies that have also indicated negative perceptions around public relations practitioners. 74, 75

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In any case, further research is needed to understand better the bureaucratic and organizational barriers imposed to communication professionals in CSR departments.

We do know, however, that this dichotomy is not only about assigning importance to communication while downplaying the role of professional communication, but it also reflects a wider paradox between theory and practice within CSR departments. Indeed, when asked about the need to engage the public in the process of designing CSR policies, 97% responded that it was in fact “very important”. Moreover, many of the same respondents added how digital technologies had enabled the possibility of ample consultation and dialogue. However, when the responses from the semi-structured interviews were contrasted against the actual digital records of the companies, we found that in only a few cases had the organization actually used these technologies to open bidirectional channels of communications with its stakeholders and the public. Moreover, in most cases in the sample, there was no evidence that any feedback had been incorporated or even taken into account in the design or evaluation of any of the CSR programs in question. In other words, there is a big disparity between the normative claims of communication engagement and the actual practice on the ground. Rather than inclusive consultation, the communication provisions – both organizational and digital – are in fact set in a very traditional hierarchical form by the top managers of the organizations.

The data also suggests that despite normative claims of symmetrical approaches and the rise of the interactive and digital technologies, the predominant channels of communication continue to be used in very unidirectional ways from the top to the bottom. To be sure, the main channels used by CSR staff to engage with stakeholders and the public are annual reports (93%), traditional corporate website (86%), email (82%) and questionnaires (79%). Other channels used include discussion fora (64%) and group meetings (86%), but this – for what we observed – are

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performed in controlled environments, and none of its contents or outputs seem to permeate into CSR policy or actions.

To make matters worse, there seems to be an important gap in the understanding of what dialogue in the digital era means. Indeed, while 57% of the interviewees claim to use Facebook or LinkedIn, 32% use blogs and 32% use Twitter as channels to communicate with the public, our own ethnographic observations found no conversations at all. Instead, what we were able to observe were very ‘standardized’ messages with little or no interaction between the publics and the organizations. In other words, these technological platforms are mostly used as channels for top-to-bottom dissemination rather than as a space for conversation. This top-to-bottom dissemination is even more prevalent in the way these organizations understand and manage their annual reports.

What CSR reports say

From previous research, we know that companies claim to have different reasons for issuing CSR reports but that, in practice, those who do so mainly see these reports as being ‘good for business’.⁷⁶ Therefore, despite the fact that an annual CSR report should be an instrument to engage with the general public in general and stakeholders in particular, it is not surprising to see how in 61% of cases there is a clear focus on internal stakeholders. Moreover, 100% of companies included employees, and a very large proportion of these reports were dedicated to shareholders and investors (97%), while 94% of these reports dedicated sections to customers (94%). In other words, CSR reports have effectively become an instrument for the company to talk to itself and to its clients rather than with society at large.

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Indeed, only in 33% of these reports we were able to find references to ‘other’ stakeholders such as foundations, regulators, indigenous communities and media. The content analysis found relatively low frequency in the use of words relating to corporate governance, analysts and experts, opinion leaders and external bloggers. What our content analysis highlights is that CSR reports tend to leave aside what Burson-Marsteller call ‘e-influential’ or ‘techno-influential’ stakeholders,

A new breed of opinion leaders, influential and focused on technology, seamlessly connecting their work and personal lives while transmitting information on companies, brands and products. **77**

This again happens despite explicit normative claims made around communication. Indeed, 85% of the CSR reports provided information about the tools of dialogue and participation that are used in the organization, both in the area of CSR and in business in general. These reports make explicit claims about external communication tools, which are said to be both bidirectional and unidirectional. These claims seem to be based on the notion that traditional websites and microblogging are per se interactive and bidirectional and the belief that this in itself is sufficient to create spaces for symmetrical dialogue. In 100% of cases, the reports claim to use online tools such as corporate websites, emails and online documentation available on the web to engage with the public, while in 67% of the cases similar claims are made in relation to the use of specific microsites.

In these reports, the CSR departments claim to use other digital spaces such as e-conferences and e-meetings (61%), followed by face-to-face meetings with different stakeholders (58%). But contrasting this with the semi-structured interviews and the

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observations, it became clear that the use of these spaces was heavily controlled and not entirely open. With a lower frequency in their use, we find a mailbox for suggestions and complaints (36%), online newsletters (27%), email services (email or mobile message) and online forums, with 24% in both cases. In all, 21% turn to blogs and to a lesser degree, corporate publications, such as corporate magazines (18%) and institutional magazines (15%).

Finally, social networks (15%) and subscription services or RSS (6%) score at the bottom of our analysis. In this sense, social networks appearing in CSR reports as channels with stakeholders are Twitter (36%), Facebook (36%) and YouTube (33%). Those that appear less prominently are Flickr (21%), LinkedIn (9%), Tuenti (9%) and Slideshare (6%). Other social networks are appearing, such as Xing (6%), Picassa (3%) and Google+ (3%), particularly as these companies expand in other markets. Interestingly, all these forms of social media and networking scored way below very traditional channels such as the corporate magazines, which are still used in 58% of the cases to deliver the message to the stakeholders as the preferred channel to communicate with stakeholders.

CSR on PR

The close reading of CSR reports can also help elucidate how those producing the report – staff in CSR departments – see the issues concerning to PR. The results point out different categories. On a first instance (Level A), we find that an overwhelming majority of the reports deal with risk management (85%), relationships with stakeholders (76%), the production itself of CSR reports (76%), ethical codes (70%), corporate image and reputation (61%), internal communication management (61%), CSR training (61%), communication channels and face-to-face contact with

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the public (58%) and external communication management (52%). In other words, CSR staff in their own annual reports recognized these areas – associated with PR – as priorities in their day-to-day work.

On a second level (which we will call B), we found that 33% of the reports deal with communication channels online 2.0. These included issues relating to transparency, such as CSR redemption accounts (33%), marketing and/or advertising responsible (33%) and research on CSR (6%). On a third level (called C), we found CSR agendas by countries and topics such as education, health, productivity and energy efficiency, the resolution of conflicts through approved systems, communication and crisis management, code of ethics in advertising and suppliers, measuring 2.0 environments reputation and credibility. All of these are issues that demand professional communication expertise. Therefore, the absence of public relations professionals in CSR departments is even more striking.

Conclusions

The case remains that many CSR departments underperform in relation to extracting the full potential of professional communication approaches in general, and in particular, they fail in taking advantage of the wide set of possibilities offered by new digital and interactive media technologies. We can only speculate as to why these departments are so reluctant to engage in a more comprehensive manner with PR as a professional discipline and as to why public relations practitioners tend to seem systematically excluded from CSR. Moreover, when it is perfectly clear to us that by developing these bridges between CSR departments and public relations professionals they could become an ‘ombudsmen’⁷⁸ for both stakeholders and the public at large

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and therefore fulfill their potential as a space for transparency and accountability in a complex and challenging era in which social media and digital technologies are creating a set of new demands.⁷⁹

Examining the interviews responses to this lack of recognition of and cooperation with PR, it is clear that professional boundaries and protection of ‘guilds’ seem to play an important part in creating barriers against these professionals. Not only because of what the interviewees and their CSR report said, but also because of what they did not say. That is, a lack of reasonable justification as to why they are reluctant to employ more public relations professionals. These silences perhaps also help explain, in part, the gender imbalances at the top of the managerial scale, which no doubt are a key component in these attitudes towards PR.

Indeed, being small departments within large organizations, people might become very protective of their working space and jobs. In these cases, managers tend to act as a Pretorian Guard for vested interests and traditional organizational arrangements. However, this has tremendous organizational and ethical implications as the incorporation of public relations professionals into CSR departments could also help close the gender gap. After all, it is a unique professional area overwhelmingly pursued by women who tend to occupy leadership and managerial roles, something desperately needed in CSR departments.⁸⁰

Our data, at least in the case of Spain, challenge in part the findings of other authors in relation to how in European companies CSR and communication departments seem to frequently engage and cooperate in the continent. According to these authors, referring to other countries in Europe, these are the two departments that tend to more frequently cooperate and are more likely to have formalized their cooperation.⁸¹ This regrettably does not seem to be the case of Spain, where instead the biggest companies’ CSR and communication departments appear to be living

3.2 The imperative needs of dialogue between CSR departments and PR practitioners

in almost parallel universes. Nevertheless, against this seemingly distinctiveness of Spain let us not forget – and warn – that the variety of studies around CSR departments in Europe and the United States have been mostly based on perceptions derived from interviews, therefore dominated by normative claims rather than by empirical observations.

If anything, by triangulating different approaches and research strategies, our findings show the lack of professionalization for communication in CSR on an empirical level. This applies well in Spain and perhaps also in other countries. It would be advisable for researchers of these societies to examine factual empirical evidence beyond the normative claims made in semi-structured interviews. Moreover, as Russo and Perrini⁸² have stated, when we have seen globally how “large firms still lack the ability to integrate the management of these specific relationships into their corporate strategy”.

If this gap is to be filled, then CSR departments ought to consider the incorporation of professional communication practitioners at the core of their strategy, something that at the moment is not happening. Perhaps, in all justice to the CSR departments, there seems to be a generalized distrust against PR, not because of their professional capacity but instead because communication departments are generally perceived to be “aligned to the strategic management of the organization, whereas this is not always the case for the CSR departments”.⁸³ In other words, it is not so much the professional capacities of those individuals which are in question, but the ethical reservations around their ability to detach themselves sufficiently from the core objectives of the organization. Public relations professionals are in fact seen as prone to ‘contaminate’ or ‘hinder’ the ability of CSR departments to communicate effectively and transparently with the stakeholders given these ethical reservations. Sadly, in these cases, the tradition of PR is seen as too ‘rotten’ and too ‘compromised’ by many.⁸⁴

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This presents an important paradox, given the need of organizations to improve dialogue with stakeholders and to show how companies are genuinely interested in working with the community to mitigate, if not eliminate, negative societal impacts. In today's digital era, these companies have to demonstrate how they are working to introduce the stakeholder's point of view in their agenda. They need to prove how committed they are with CSR and society and, on top of that, be able to communicate this message effectively, particularly in the light of unfulfilled promises and mistakes made in the past. But how to do this without a close collaboration and engagement with professional communication? Particularly in light of the emergence of a multiplicity of 2.0 tools, which so far – as we have seen here – have been mostly sub-utilized. These questions, in our sample of companies, remain wide open and in need of further research. Nevertheless, these are issues, which urgently need to be addressed.

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