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Working Paper

Public Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

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Public relations and Corporate Social Responsibility:

A review of the literature

Abstract

This study analyses trends and patterns in public relations literature about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) through a content analysis of articles published between 1998 and 2007. The current status of the literature suggests that public relations scholars have broadened their approach to CSR from one solely encompassing communication management, as proposed by Clark (2000), to one that incorporates the management function and relationship management components of contemporary public relations thinking. The findings of the literature review suggest that there are opportunities for social responsibility to be incorporated into public relations through a process approach, which would foster stronger links between organizations, stakeholders and society.

1. Introduction

In 2000, Clark identified that the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature had largely ignored the role of public relations and offered a communication management approach to maximize the relationships between organizations and stakeholders. Since the publication of that article, CSR has become an increasingly important phenomenon in business at both academic and practical levels (De Bakker, Groenewegen & Den Hond, 2005). Reinforcing Clark's (2000) conclusions about the links between public relations and CSR, recent research has found that public relations practitioners are often responsible for CSR work in organizations (ACCSR, 2007; Zhang & Swanson, 2006; Sagar & Singla, 2004). Given that public relations has a role to play in the business priority of CSR at both academic and practical levels, it is important and timely to review how the public relations literature is addressing CSR and to consider directions for future research.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, we examine the public relations literature related to CSR since Clark's (2000) article to identify how CSR is being treated in this domain. Second, we consider how CSR is being treated in terms of the evolving public relations theoretical agenda that has moved from a focus on communication management to a focus on relationship management. Clark's (2000) comparison of CSR and public relations identified many similarities in their evolution. The challenge for scholars is in charting its future path.

Fundamental societal changes during the 1960s and 1970s saw the practice of public relations evolve from its information dissemination origins into a discipline that was more about issue response, accountability and social responsibility as central to organization-public relationships. It was at this point that Clark (2000) stated that CSR and public relations were most similar, highlighting the fact that both public relations and CSR aim to understand their stakeholder environments in order to respond to society's demands. While Clark's (2000) discussion provided a valuable consideration of the CSR phenomena, the focus on communication management presented in 2000 retains its focus on just one aspect of contemporary public relations thinking. Seminal work on public relations as

communication management was defined in the 1992 Excellence studies (Grunig, 1992). We suggest there are three key streams in the public relations literature that are useful for considering the role of public relations in CSR. The first stream in the literature presents *public relations as a management function*, which uses the attributes of management (e.g., planning, collaborative decision making, and research) to foster the organization's ability to build mutually beneficial relationships on which the corporate vision and mission depend (Grunig, 2001). The second stream in the literature presents *public relations as communication management*, which focuses on the flow of communication between an organization and its publics to achieve effective relationships (Grunig, 1992). The third stream of literature presents *public relations as relationship management*, so that communication is a property of those relationships rather than the conduit between organizations and publics (Ferguson, 1984; Broom, Casey, and Ritchey, 1997).

While these approaches are inherently interdependent, the unit of analysis in each perspective provides a useful frame for considering public relations practices: management focuses on the planning process in the organization, communication focuses on the strategic understanding of the flow of information, and relationship management focuses on the nature of the relationship itself. As the name suggests, the communication management in CSR model put forward by Clark (2000) places a strong focus on strategically understanding stakeholders and the communication that takes place between them and the organization. This examination of the public relations literature related to CSR seeks to build a greater understanding of this relationship.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, a short literature review of the key developments in the broader literature around CSR across management disciplines is presented. Based on this, key attributes of CSR thinking are presented. Second, an analysis of the public relations literature is presented, which highlights the key themes of the research. Finally, the implications for current discussions of public relations as a management function that focuses on communication and relationship management are presented.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility

Like strategic management perspectives of public relations, systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968) provided some foundational thinking for Preston and Post (1975) when they considered the relationship between organizations and their environment. Rather than systems being based on exchange relationships, Preston and Post (1975) argued that organizations and environments could operate as interdependent systems. These early CSR concerns revolved around the set of processes that arise when organizations and their environments interpenetrate and were focused on the secondary impacts arising from the organizational pursuit of efficient outcomes (Preston & Post, 1975).

This perspective focused on the relationships between organizations and their environments that extended beyond those that solely resulted in efficiency and exchange. The extent of the domains of these relationships were addressed by Carroll (1979), who stated that the “social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point of time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). McWilliams and Siegel (2001) focus on the intent of the actions and relationships by suggesting that CSR comprises “actions that further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (p. 117). The domains in which these “responsible” actions take place are now widely accepted to span across economic, social and environmental dimensions (Carroll, 1979).

An important clarification that has evolved in the CSR literature is the articulation of the role of stakeholders, rather than society as a whole, in defining CSR. While Carroll (1999) included the notion of society as the interface to the organization, Whetten, Rands and Godfrey (2001) shifted the definition to include the notion of *stakeholder* in suggesting that CSR is “societal expectations of corporate behavior: a behavior that is alleged by a stakeholder to be expected by society or morally required and is therefore justifiably demanded of business” (p. 374). This configures stakeholders as the means through which society’s expectations are translated, represented and delivered to the

organizational interface (De Bakker *et al.*, 2005). Stakeholders are thus separated out from the broader social environment, suggesting that the interaction between organizations and stakeholders provides the operational level at which CSR is socially constructed. Such a perspective is evident in the communication management perspective presented by Clark (2000).

One of the reasons for this shift is that stakeholders provide organizations with a range of resources that are required to conduct their business, such as capital, customers, employees, materials and legitimacy (Bailey *et al.*, 2000, 1998, 1994, cited in Deegan, 2002). This creates a mutual obligation, with stakeholders conceived as providing a “license to operate” to the organization in return for their provision of socially acceptable, or legitimate, actions (Cornelissen, 2004; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Guthrie & Parker, 1989; Suchman, 1995). The result is a form of social contract that allows the organization to continue operations (Deegan, 2002; Golob & Bartlett, 2007). As such, the CSR literature articulates the outcomes and importance of these relationships between organizations and stakeholders. The focus on relationships that extend beyond exclusively financial and exchange imperatives is consistent with perspectives related to their importance in public relations literature in contributing more broadly to organizational success (e.g., Cutlip, Centre & Broom, 2006; Bruning and Ledingham, 1999).

However, the CSR literature itself has limited, albeit evolving, explication of relationships between organizations and specific stakeholders. Some of the few studies have considered employees (Zappala, 2004) and non-government organizations (Danastas & Gadenne, 2006; Phillips, 2005). Much of the discussion focuses on communication with stakeholders in particular contexts such as philanthropy (Sargeant & Crissman, 2006), cause-related marketing (Kropp, Holden & Lavack, 1999) and corporate social disclosure (Frost, Jones, Loftus & Laan, 2005; Golob & Bartlett, 2007; McMurtrie, 2005).

This initial review of the broad CSR literature does two things. First, it reinforces the assertions made in the public relations literature by Clark (2000) that there are commonalities between public

relations and CSR, and that communication management offers a perspective for furthering the role of public relations in the relationships between organizations and stakeholders. Second, it creates an opportunity to examine how the public relations literature has explained its role in the relationships between organizations and stakeholders that addresses management, communication and relationships.

3. Method

In order to examine the public relations literature related to CSR, public relations journals were examined over a ten year period. The journals selected were *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Journal of Communication Management*, which are representative of public relations literature (Zoch, Collins & Cisco, 2007). We used the terms “public relations” and “corporate social responsibility” within ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost, and Emerald to search the titles and abstracts in the three journals. The search produced a total of 40 articles for consideration. Of these articles, 18 were published in *Public Relations Review*, 20 were published in the *Journal of Communication Management*, and two were published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*.

Further sorting of the articles was then conducted. First, a ten year data collection period (1998-2007) was chosen in order to capture the time period immediately surrounding Clark’s study until the present day. Further, it was apparent that there were few articles on CSR prior to that time period and the ten-year timeframe provided a concise time period to examine. Thirty-three of the articles met the timeframe criteria. Second, the articles were individually reviewed in order to determine if their content related to both public relations and corporate social responsibility. If the articles did not discuss public relations and CSR as their primary topic, they were discarded. A total of 21 articles remained and were used in the study.

Initially, the 21 articles were analyzed by a simple count of the occurrence of CSR articles (1) across the various journals, (2) by year, and (3) by type of paper (conceptual or empirical). Iterative reading of the articles was then conducted in order to identify key themes within the articles as they

related to central concepts in the public relations and CSR literatures. Articles could be coded by more than one theme, as the focus in this section of analysis was to understand the extent of discussion around central themes.

4. Findings

4.1 Description of public relations literature related to CSR from 1998 to 2007

4.1.1 Journals publishing work related to CSR

The largest proportion of the articles on CSR in the public relations literature were published in the *Public Relations Review*, which accounted for 10 of the 21 (48%) articles (see Table 1). The *Journal of Communication Management* also accounted for a significant number of articles, publishing a total of 9 (43%). The *Journal of Public Relations Research* contributed the remaining two articles (9%).

Insert Table 1 here

4.1.2 Increased publication of CSR articles 2002-2007

A further analysis of the articles showed that there was a marked increase in the number of articles published in the second five-year period compared to the first five-year period of the data set. As Table 1 shows, there were only six articles related to CSR published in public relations journals from 1998 to 2002. This figure rose to 15 articles between 2003 and 2007. The results suggest that CSR has been recognized by the editors of the public relations journals as being of greater importance to academics and practitioners. Capriotti and Moreno (2006) suggest that CSR has long been considered a key aspect of public relations, yet it has not become a prominent issue internationally until recently. De Bakker *et al.* (2005) agree that there has been increased practitioner attention to CSR, and this study

highlights the increased attention within the academic public relation literature: 72% of CSR studies were published in the last five years.

Another factor that may account for the increased attention to CSR is the 2002 release of the Global Reporting Index (GRI), which provided an international framework for articulating and reporting on CSR practices by organizations. The release of the GRI played a significant role in institutionalizing CSR as a business concept in the international arena (Bartlett, Tywoniak & Hatcher, 2007).

4.1.3 Empirical vs. conceptual papers

The articles were then further analyzed to see whether they added an empirical or conceptual focus to CSR. It is significant to identify how many public relations studies are empirical because that indicates the amount of literature that has been supported by data, rather than the amount that seeks to expand conceptual discussion. As Table 2 shows, the majority of papers published on CSR in the public relations literature are of an empirical nature (52%), with conceptual studies accounting for slightly less than half the papers (48%). However, in the earlier years of the study (1998-2002), the ratio of conceptual to empirical papers published was 5:1. It was not until recently that the style of papers has shifted towards an empirical focus. This suggests that scholars are becoming engaged in understanding the way in which public relations and CSR operate, rather than promoting the aspirational goals of the relationship.

Insert Table 2 here

4.2 CSR related to central themes of public relations literature

Following the publication analysis, the contents of the articles in the data set (1998-2007) were categorized using the three streams previously identified: management function, communication management, and relationship management. The analysis showed that the articles did relate to each of these three streams, as depicted in Table 3 below. When classifying the articles into streams, there were a number of articles that fit within two streams. This was caused by the direct correlation between streams. For instance, some articles contained both CSR reporting (i.e., how organizations communicate) and relationship management (i.e., communication as a property of relationships), causing the article to fit within two primary streams. A total of 50 themes were identified across the 21 articles.

Insert Table 3 here

Further to this, we explored how the CSR themes are dealt with in the public relations literature. This was done by reviewing the literature related to each of the three streams of public relations. This allows for consideration of how the literature related to CSR informs and is informed by these central pillars of public relations scholarship.

4.2.1 CSR and public relations as a management function

One of the central claims of public relations is that it is a management function (Grunig, 2001). Analysis of the CSR articles in this study showed that there were three key management themes investigated by public relations scholars: ethics, the public relations profession and public relations history. The number of articles related to each theme in each journal is presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here

The management function stream accounted for 20 (40%) of the total number of themes identified in the literature, which broadly aggregate to three themes: the public relations profession, its history, and its ethics. The literature has identified public relations as a management function within the planning process in the organization. Further, research on CSR shows that public relations professionals are often responsible for CSR activities, demonstrating a direct correlation to their involvement in other themes such as ethics, CSR reporting and organization reputation.

The studies on ethics confirm the claim that public relations has a responsibility to consider the ethics of the organizations. Schoenberger-Orgad and McKie (2005) found CSR in organizations to be a defensive act of self-interest and argue that there needs to be a shift in processes to ones that are proactive and move the organization away from the boardroom bottom-line. Starck and Kruckeberg (2003) reinforce this perspective and suggest that it is time for organizations to see CSR as a voluntary act of selflessness that works towards bettering society as a whole. In contrast, Munshi and Kurian (2005) argue that an organization can only truly be considered ethical if it considers its impact on all of its stakeholders, not just the ones that the organization sees as significant.

While the motivations behind ethical CSR differ across the studies, there is a common agreement throughout that suggests that organizations are currently lacking a commitment to ethics in CSR (Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003; Schoenberger-Orgad & McKie, 2005). Munshi and Kurian (2005) reason that this is because CSR has become a communication-driven strategy that an organization can use to manipulate its image for social acceptance. However, Brown's (2008) findings suggest that CSR has evolved into a reactive marketing strategy due to scant literature on its origins.

The findings of these studies raise concerns for the concept of public relations as a management function because they suggest that it is not currently fulfilling this duty. In order to be considered

ethical, public relations professionals must peruse CSR on a deeper level in which initiatives expand further than image building and the commitment to CSR becomes a proactive push from within.

4.2.2 CSR and public relations as communication management

The communication management stream encompasses CSR reporting, new communication technologies and CSR marketing, and accounted for 17 (34%) of the 50 themes identified (see Table 5). CSR reporting was conducted in one of three ways: information dissemination, responsive approach and interactive approach. Both new communication technologies and CSR marketing were discussed as a means to promote transparency and accountability, foster communication, and build trust between an organization and its key publics.

Insert Table 5 here

The most popular theme in the communication management stream was CSR reporting, in which nine papers were published. There were three key ways CSR reporting was approached. The first was purely as information dissemination (Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Esrock & Leichy, 1998), which suggests that CSR is essentially a communication technique. Golob & Bartlett (2007) believe that one-way communication is necessary for global consistency. Conversely, Esrock and Leichy (1998) suggest that disseminating information on the internet would bypass media gatekeepers and act as an agenda-setting tool.

The second way approach to CSR reporting was as a two-way communication mechanism (O'Connor, 2001; Badaracco, 1998; Capriotti & Moreno, 2006). These papers all discussed the role of the internet in CSR and public relations. They state that changing technologies have resulted in greater demand for transparency and accountability from society. By using the two-way communication

approach, O'Connor (2001), Badaracco (1998), and Capriotti and Moreno (2006) suggest public relations can take advantage of the internet to improve the relationships between an organization and its stakeholders.

The third and final approach to CSR reporting, the interactive approach, was discussed with regard to stakeholder engagement theory (Bartlett, Tywoniak & Hatcher, 2007; Tench, Bowd & Jones, 2007; Sarbutts, 2003). These authors support the idea that publicity and one-way communication was effective early on to deal with stakeholder demands; however, due to changing society organizations must now engage in dialogue to meet their concerns. Bartlett *et al.* (2007) demonstrated this shift by highlight the global demand for transparency and accountability and stated that these new public relations practices (i.e., consult, negotiate and engage) were becoming a more accepted way to deal with stakeholders. Sarbutts (2003) thought that CSR can only truly produce the desired result when it “is not explicit but is there to be discovered and valued by stakeholders in their own terms” (p. 343). Likewise, Tench *et al.* (2007) suggest that organizations ought to recognize stakeholder dialogue as imperative and constructive.

4.2.3 CSR and public relations as relationship management

Within the relationship management stream, three broad areas of reputation building, trust generation and relationship management were recognized, which encompassed the remaining 13 themes (26%) identified (see Table 6).

Insert Table 6 here

Using the framework of *public relations as relationship management*, professionals must foster open and frank communication, build trust, and demonstrate involvement, investment, and commitment (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Mishra's (2006) approach demonstrated organizational involvement in

the support of the community on the organization's webpage. Mishra (2006) asserted that by transferring symbolic CSR communication efforts into a behavioral CSR strategy, an organization can engender loyalty in order to build long-term relationships with its key publics.

Capriotti and Moreno (2006) also sought benefits in approaching CSR from a relational perspective and similarly viewed corporate websites as a key channel in managing organization-public relationships. In contrast to Mishra (2006), Capriotti and Moreno (2006) expanded on the role of public relations to describe it as the heart of CSR, in which CSR is the organization's stated commitments (i.e., economic, social, environmental and informational) to its key publics.

Capriotti (2007) suggests that CSR is part of an organization's contract to society, in which it must contribute and collaborate in informing the community about potential health risks, in particular risks about chemical substances. This perspective of CSR echoes Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) theory because it discusses the importance of organization-public relationship dimensions (e.g., openness, trust and commitment) to maintain social legitimacy.

Sagar and Singla (2004) followed a similar pattern, discussing the importance of organization-public relationship dimensions using a number of micro-level cases studies (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, Xerox and Kodak) to demonstrate how negative ramifications have lead to the erosion of trust in business globally. They state that the role of public relations is to generate trust through CSR and to utilize it as the social face that drives stakeholder relationships (Sagar and Singla, 2004). By doing so, Sagar and Singla (2004) declare that public relations consultants be serious about relationship management and bridge the gap between trust and CSR initiatives.

The literature has identified that there is a need for relationship management and that management should utilize their websites to communicate strategically to key stakeholders (Mishra, 2006; Capriotti & Moreno, 2006; Capriotti, 2007; Sagar and Singla, 2004). By adopting a stakeholder engagement approach, organizations will be able to engage with key active publics in aspects of the

decision-making process, engage in dialogue to gauge their opinions, perceptions and needs, and close the legitimacy gap through the formation of strategic relationships (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

5. Implications for Further Research

In this study, we reviewed the public relations literature in order to understand how it has treated CSR. Within the past five years there has been increased attention to CSR, with scholars documenting the field more broadly. There is evidence that CSR is not just perceived as a form of communication management, as suggested by Clark (2000), but that scholars also consider CSR in terms of management function, communication management and relationship management. With studies showing public relations to be the main organizational practice area responsible for implementation of CSR activities, there is a need for practices to incorporate a multitude of approaches from information dissemination to relationship management. This suggests that further research to understand and guide practice is required across all three streams of public relations literature in order for organizations to engage in responsible relationships with stakeholders in general society.

The literature that discussed public relations as a management function presents a concern for the public relations discipline, as it illustrates the lack of ethics in the workplace. These critical perspectives remind us to challenge the role of public relations managers as agents of the organization, as well as acting on behalf of the interests of society more generally. Scholars who published empirical studies did so primarily by analyzing the private sector to highlight a shift in practice owing to the CSR phenomenon. This was done by considering new communication technologies as devices to facilitate the building of trust, responsiveness and ultimately social legitimacy. Such perspectives, which are central components of the relationship management framework, would likewise draw value from considering the ethics of public relations agency at a macro-level.

However, there is also an opportunity to draw on Clark (2000), because she established the similarities between public relations and CSR as processes rather than a set of activities. The process of Corporate Social Performance (Wood, 1991), as Clark (2000) argues, presents a model for the ongoing management of the relationship between organization and stakeholders that addresses both internal and external demands. Wood (1991) defines CSR as a business organization's configuration of the principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and the policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm's societal relationships. The model put forward by Wood (1991) has a stronger focus on the process of managing the relationship between the organization and stakeholders in terms of organizational policies and operations. As such, Clark's (2000) communication management model provides an additional component to that perspective by presenting the machinations of the role of communication in this process. An emphasis on processes can therefore address issues about ethics and of 'greenwash' in communication activities by viewing the role of public relations and CSR as ongoing processes of negotiation between organizations, stakeholders and society.

This suggests that further work could focus on investigating the role of public relations in the process of corporate social performance. Such a perspective would accommodate public relations and CSR as a management function that seeks to guide the organization in its strategy, a communication function in creating and disseminating information about the organization and its role in society, and as a relationship management function in developing ethical, accountable and socially responsible relationships with key stakeholders.

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Table 1. Articles published on CSR

Publication	1998-2002 Number	2003-2007 Number	Total by Journal Number	Total by journal %
Public Relations Review	3	7	10	48%
Journal of Communication Management	3	6	9	43%
Journal of Public Relations Research	0	2	2	9%
TOTAL	n = 6 (28%)	n = 15 (72%)	n = 21 (100%)	

Table 2. Empirical vs. conceptual papers

Publication	1998-2002 Number (%)		2003-2007 Number (%)		Total
	Conceptual	Empirical	Conceptual	Empirical	
Public Relations Review	n = 2 (20%)	n = 1 (10%)	n = 2 (20%)	n = 5 (50%)	10
Journal of Communication Management	n = 3 (33%)	n = 0 (0%)	n = 3 (33%)	n = 3 (33%)	9
Journal of Public Relations Research	n = 0 (0%)	n = 0 (0%)	n = 0 (0%)	n = 2 (100%)	2
TOTAL	n = 5 (24%)	n = 1 (4%)	n = 5 (24%)	n = 10 (48%)	21

Table 3. Number of articles related to three approaches to public relations

Public Relations Domain	Public Relations Review	Journal of Communication Management	Journal of Public Relations Review	Total by Domain
Management Function	10	8	2	20
Communication Management	10	6	1	17
Relationship Management	6	7	0	13

Table 4. Themes related to public relations as a management function

Public Relations Domain	Themes	Public Relations Review	Journal of Communication Management	Journal of Public Relations Review	Total by Theme	Total by Domain
Management Function	Ethics	4	3	1	8	20
	Public relations profession	4	5	1	10	
	History	2			2	

Table 5. Table of themes related to communication management

Public Relations Domain	Themes	Public Relations Review	Journal of Communication Management	Journal of Public Relations Review	Total by Theme	Total by Domain
Communication Management	CSR reporting	4	5		9	17
	New communication technologies	4	1		5	
	CSR marketing	2		1	3	

Table 6. Themes related to relationship management

Public Relations Domain	Themes	Public Relations Review	Journal of Communication Management	Journal of Public Relations Review	Total by Theme	Total by Domain
Relationship Management	Reputation building		2		2	13
	Trust generation		1		1	
	Relationship management	6	4		10	