

ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS
AND COMMUNICATION
MANAGEMENT

RESPONSIBILITY IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: TRUTH OR TRAP?

EDITED BY

DENISA HEJLOVÁ
PETRA KOUDELKOVÁ
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RESPONSIBILITY IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

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ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND
COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT VOLUME 8

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

Stefania Romenti

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This book is the result of the fruitful discussions and intellectual exchange had among scholars, PhD students, and professionals in public relations and strategic communication during the Congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) organized by the Charles University of Prague from September 20 to 23, 2023. EUPRERA is an association with nearly 550 members from 50 countries interested in advancing academic research and knowledge in strategic communication. The EUPRERA Congress in Prague had the title *Responsible Communication or Communicating Responsibility?*

The concept of sustainability has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central tenet of organizational strategy and global policy over the past few decades (Elkington & Rowlands, 1998; Sachs, 2015). As businesses, governments, and institutions increasingly adopt sustainable practices, the importance of effectively communicating these efforts has grown exponentially. This book explores how companies engage in sustainability communication, examining its significance, challenges, and potential for driving positive change.

Sustainability communication serves as a crucial bridge between organizations and their stakeholders, playing a vital role in shaping perceptions, behaviors, and policies (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). This process goes beyond mere information dissemination; it involves dialogue, engagement, and the cocreation of meaning around sustainability issues (Crane & Glozer, 2016). When executed effectively, it not only demonstrates an entity's commitment to environmental and social responsibility but also educates and motivates others to take action. The impact of strategic sustainability communication is far-reaching and multi-dimensional. Research has shown that it can enhance organizational reputation, attract environmentally conscious consumers and investors, boost employee morale, and influence public policy (Reilly & Hynan, 2014; Signitzer & Prexl, 2008). Moreover, it plays a crucial role in legitimizing corporate sustainability efforts and managing stakeholder expectations (Schultz et al., 2013). In the realm of consumer behavior, effective sustainability communication can significantly influence purchasing decisions. Studies have demonstrated that consumers are

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increasingly considering sustainability factors in their choices, with clear and credible communication serving as a key differentiator in crowded markets (Ottman, 2011). This trend is particularly pronounced among younger generations, who often prioritize sustainability in their consumption patterns. From an investor perspective, robust sustainability communication can attract socially responsible investment (SRI) and improve access to capital. As noted by Eccles et al. (2014), companies that integrate sustainability into their core strategies and effectively communicate these efforts tend to outperform their peers over the long term, both in stock market and accounting performance. Internally, sustainability communication plays a vital role in employee engagement and organizational culture. Employees who are aware of and involved in their company's sustainability initiatives report higher job satisfaction and stronger organizational commitment (Glavas, 2012). This, in turn, can lead to improved productivity, reduced turnover, and a more positive work environment (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014). On a broader scale, effective sustainability communication can influence public policy and industry standards. By transparently reporting on sustainability performance and engaging in public discourse, organizations can contribute to shaping regulatory frameworks and industry best practices (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). This can create a positive feedback loop, where improved communication leads to more ambitious sustainability goals, which in turn drives further advancements in communication practices.

However, research has long shown that the effectiveness of sustainability communication is contingent upon its authenticity and alignment with actual organizational practices. As Brunton et al. (2017) emphasize, there must be congruence between an organization's communicated sustainability values and its actions to build and maintain stakeholder trust. This highlights the complex relationship between sustainability performance and communication, underscoring the need for a holistic approach to sustainability management.

The impact of well-communicated sustainability efforts extends beyond individual organizations, contributing to broader societal awareness and fostering collective responsibility. As Newig et al. (2013) argue, effective sustainability communication can play a transformative role in societal change toward more sustainable patterns of production and consumption.

However, the task of communicating sustainability is fraught with complexities. Organizations face the challenge of balancing transparency with the risk of criticism, navigating diverse stakeholder expectations, and conveying often complex technical information to a general audience (Scandellius & Cohen, 2016). The complex nature of sustainability – encompassing environmental, social, and governance aspects – adds layers of intricacy to the communication process (Elkington & Rowlands, 1998). Years of greenwashing and misleading claims have eroded public trust, resulting in increased skepticism toward sustainability messaging (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This skepticism is compounded by the lack of universally accepted sustainability reporting standards, leading to confusion and difficulty in comparing efforts across organizations (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013). Moreover, the very tools of communication can be wielded to obscure as much as they can reveal. Some organizations may employ

sophisticated communication strategies to divert attention from less sustainable practices or to overemphasize minor initiatives, presenting an ethical challenge that demands careful consideration (Bowen, 2014; Font et al., 2012).

Given these challenges, this book aims to provide insights into communicating sustainability effectively. Drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, we will examine various approaches to crafting authentic, transparent, and impactful sustainability narratives. The overarching goal is to contribute to a more transparent, accountable, and sustainable organizational landscape. By synthesizing existing knowledge and fostering dialogue, we hope to empower readers to communicate sustainability in ways that overcome skepticism and drive meaningful change.

1. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book contains a selection of the best papers presented and discussed during the Prague Congress. The following words provide a flavor of each chapter.

In the chapter *Public Relations and Responsibility: Pricklier Relations in Polarized Times*, Ganga S. Dhanesh reviews the current macro environment organizations are situated in, replete with divided, polarized publics who might react in diametrically opposite ways to social responsibility program and finally proposes pathways to address these issues.

Wim J. L. Elving in the chapter *The Complexity and Opportunities of CSR* analyses the new EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (European Union, 2024) and the consequences this has for organizations, but also the opportunities and risks it provides in relation to the spread of disinformation. He also discusses the recent court cases against companies and governments regarding greenwashing as well as the opportunities for organizations in positioning themselves on sustainability in the war for talents.

The Evolution and Controversy of ESG: Communicating Responsibility or Responsible Communication? is the chapter written by Denisa Hejlová who examines the intricate landscape of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles, addressing their entwined relationship with politics and evolving moral standards. It presents a critical discourse on the authenticity of corporate intentions versus their actual conduct. This chapter uses case studies from the tobacco, finance, and fashion industries to show how companies must navigate the fine line between responsibility in practice.

In the chapter *Is it all fake? The Rhetoric in CSR and Sustainability Communication: Literature Review*, Giuseppe Bonaccorso has enlightened a wide academic research for a comprehensive understanding of studies on rhetorical CSR and sustainability. He defines six different goals that rhetoric would have in communicating sustainability.

Rongtitya Rith in the study *Corporate Social Responsibility Skepticism as a Multi-Dimensional Construct: A Scoping Literature Review* provides a scoping review to appraise the status quo of CSR vis-à-vis skepticism scholarship and examines how the two concepts have been contextualized in relation to one

another in the extant literature in question. The qualitative content analysis was performed on 58 studies published from 2007 to 2022.

Alexandre Duarte and Patrícia Dias explore if and how CEO activism is manifesting in the Portuguese context. In their chapter *CEO Activism in Portugal: A View from Inside*, the authors explore the perspective of Portuguese CEOs on the topic, the course of action that they are taking, and how they evaluate risks and opportunities. For these purposes, they implemented a qualitative methodology based on interviews to 24 Portuguese CEOs and used thematic analysis to explore them.

Nilüfer Geysi in the chapter *Stakeholder Engagement for Sustainable Development: Exploring Award-Winning Campaigns* analyzes projects awarded in the SDG category at the Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity, utilizing the content analysis method. The study examines the trends and engagement strategies employed by organizations in the realm of SDGs. Additionally, the study gives practical recommendations for corporations aiming to enhance their SDG-themed strategic communication efforts.

Stefania Romenti, Elanor Colleoni, Grazia Murtarelli, and Camilla Moroni through the study *Artificial Intelligence Ethical Violations and Corporate Response Strategies* examine a unique database of AI failures and related litigation in order to map the emerging types of reputational issues and the corresponding crisis communications responses of companies engaging with AI, with the overarching goal of exploring the factors driving the various response strategies. This analysis contributes to the emerging field of AI ethics by explicitly linking it to crisis communication, highlighting the critical role of ethical considerations in managing reputational risk.

Samira Rahimi Mavi and Sabine Einwiller in the chapter “*Communicating About Controversial Issues – The Case of Halal Offerings in the Food Retail and Banking Sectors in Germany and Austria*” contribute to the existing literature on (political) CSR and moral legitimacy by examining corporate communication on ethical principles. They provide a normative evaluation of companies’ web-based external CSR communication on halal products for ethnic-religious minorities through a content analysis of companies’ websites, online shops, Facebook pages, and CSR reports.

The chapter *Hashtag Hijacking as a Governmental Social Responsibility Action. A Communication Network Approach to the Covid-19 Vaccination Arena in Romania* by Camelia Cmeciu, Anca Anton, and Eugen Glăvan assesses how the Romanian government acted as a hijacker of the #Nuvreau/#Idonotwantto hashtag launched by COVID-19 anti-vaccine advocates. Adopting an issue arena approach and employing a network analysis and a framing analysis, the chapter explores the interconnectivity and the topics in the #Nuvreau/#Idonotwantto network.

We hope that reading this volume will inspire professionals and make them aware of how delicate is communicating sustainability. At the same time, we hope that this book will inspire academics and guide them in exploring the future trends and challenges affecting the topic.

I take this opportunity to thank the Head of the Scientific Committee, Prof Chiara Valentini, all the reviewers involved in the process of paper selection and revision, and the coauthors of this book for their valuable work.

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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITY: PRICKLIER RELATIONS IN POLARIZED TIMES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the thoughts I had shared in my keynote address delivered at the 23rd annual congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), in Prague, Czech Republic in September 2023. In this address titled, “Public Relations & Responsibility: Pricklier Relations in Polarized Times,” I had pointed out tensions and stressors at the intersections of public relations and communicating responsibility, highlighting the further amplification of existing tensions as public relations attempts to articulate businesses’ voice in society in polarized times. This chapter highlighted the drawbacks of current approaches to dealing with issues of communicating the societal responsibilities of business and proposed an alternative route to address these issues, primarily through refocusing attention on corporate purpose, mission, and values and by turning to the ancient philosophy of stoicism to guide corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; CSR communication; corporate social advocacy; CSA; purpose; stoicism

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the thoughts shared in the keynote address on “Public relations and responsibility: Pricklier relations in polarized times” delivered at the 23rd annual congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), in Prague, Czech Republic in September 2023. The title reflects the theme of the conference, *Responsible Communication or*

Responsibility in Strategic Communication

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Communicating Responsibly, and hints at the historically uncomfortable relations between public relations and responsibility, ironically suggesting whether the relations could get any pricklier in the polarized times that we find ourselves in. In this address, I raised questions about the intersections of public relations and responsibility, highlighting increasing complexities in the role of public relations in articulating businesses' voice in society in polarized times and proposing ways to tackle these issues. The intention was to raise a few questions and offer a take on these issues to set the tone of the conference. This chapter is organized thus: it first defines key terms such as *responsibility*, reviews the current macro environment organizations are situated in, replete with divided, polarized publics who might react in diametrically opposite ways to a well curated social responsibility program, problematizes the drawbacks of current approaches to dealing with issues of responsibility and communication, and proposes alternative pathways to address these issues.

2. DEFINING RESPONSIBILITY

Many terms have emerged over the years with varying shades of meaning to describe the diverse responsibilities of organizations over and beyond responsibilities to shareholders. These include terms such as corporate social responsiveness, corporate social performance, triple bottom line, corporate citizenship, conscious commerce, sustainability, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG). However, a quick Google search for images to represent social and environmental responsibilities of businesses generated a plethora of green tinted images, indicative of how much the environmental dimension has hijacked online communicative spaces on these topics. This is the case with the notion of sustainability too, which has been increasingly associated with the natural environment, although definitions of sustainability typically include a wide variety of social, environmental, and governance aspects as elucidated in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hence, in this chapter, I prefer to use one of the most enduring and comprehensive terms used to refer to an inclusive range of societal responsibilities of organizations, specifically, corporate social responsibility (CSR), which according to a widely cited definition refers to "the simultaneous fulfillment of the firm's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities" (Carroll, 1991, p. 42).

This definition reflects myriad responsibilities to a multitude of stakeholders, blending the business-in-society approach and the strategic approach to CSR. The former approach is built on quid-pro-quo – businesses should give back to society as society has given sanction for businesses to function. On the other hand, the strategic approach is built on win-win thinking and contends that being socially responsible is mutually beneficial for businesses and their diverse stakeholders (Du et al., 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006). To generate mutually beneficial returns within this functionalist paradigm, firms have to engage in effective