

# **Contemporary Challenges in Communication Theory**



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## **Understanding CSR Communication Contexts Based on the Stakeholders' Theory**

**Abstract:** This theoretical paper gives a way to understand, through the stakeholders' theory, the CSR Communication in different contexts or circumstances. It attempts to explain the company's tendency and motivations that push it to communicate its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which might be a response to its stakeholders' expectations. Moreover, CSR communication could originate from managers (Internal stakeholders) awareness about the benefits that can be gained from this communication, regarding sales promotion, corporation's image and reputation etc. Furthermore, CSC may represent a response to some external stakeholders' demands or even pressures. Within this context, a model of Social Disclosure levels is suggested to highlight the CSC that is generated from stakeholders' influence (Internal/external stakeholders) on how much and how a company communicates its CSR actions. This model categorizes CSC into three levels: The Full Disclosure Level, the Selective Disclosure Level and the Symbolic Disclosure Level.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility communication, CSR, stakeholders, stakeholders' theory, social disclosure levels

### **1. Introduction**

The developing legislative, economic and social business environments have led managers to carry out a specific management by taking into consideration the societal and environmental dimensions, besides the economic dimension, within the company's activities. This complex environment, in which a company operates, is consisting of several and varied stakeholders that can affect or get affected by/on the company's activities (Freeman 1984). Many studies and researches have

focused on Stakeholders as an important variable in corporation management, especially since the publication of Freedman's book: *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (1984)* (Donaldson and Preston 1995, 65). These three dimensions represent the main pillars of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is considered as a response to: the societal demands, the stakeholders' expectations and the possibility of taking advantage of the CSR activities in order to enhance the firm's financial performance (Melé 2008). However, companies may not gain enough benefits from adopting this responsible approach, unless they involve the appropriate communication.

The objective of this contribution is to understand the CSR communication by understanding the corporation's will to communicate its CSR activities. Managers may communicate their CSR actions in order to respond to stakeholders: pressures, demands or/and expectations in different contexts and/or circumstances. Thus, we assume that companies do communicate their CSR initiatives and actions in different ways, which may depend on the context, whether internal or external, within which the company operates. Furthermore, the amount of CSR communicated data may be related to circumstances that business confronts.

Many scholars have shown interest in investigating CSR communication (Morsing 2006; Castelo and Lima 2006; Morsing and Schultz 2006; Mark-Herbert and von Schantz 2007; Birth et al. 2008; Morsing et al. 2008; Arvidsson 2010; Zieita 2012), and some researchers talk about CSR Communication even when they use only the word "Disclosure" (Nafez 2000; Mustaruddin 2009; Lungu et al. 2011; Christina and Zuaini 2012). As a result, after many fruitful studies and researches, some models were suggested from investigating CSR communication focusing on stakeholders' involvement or on their effects on company's social communication and/or management. Within this context, Morsing and Schultz (2006) have proposed three strategies regarding how companies strategically engage in CSR communication vis-a-vis their stakeholders: the stakeholder information strategy; the stakeholder response strategy; and the stakeholder involvement strategy. The authors have focused on corporation stakeholders' communication process, and communication direction whether it is one-way communication or two-way communication (in terms of either two-way asymmetric or two-way symmetric communication). Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelée (2004), have focused on CSR communication by distinguishing between two strategic organizational behaviors: (a) substantial strategy, where corporation focuses on its image and *good*

reputation, in order to seem like a citizen organization, vis-à-vis its stakeholders, even in the absence of a true adoption of a CSR policy. (b) Symbolic strategy represents congruence of the company's actions with its stakeholders' expectations and the society as a whole (Attarça and Jacquot 2005). Focusing on the environmental dimension, Rynaud and Chandon (1998) have suggested a model that distinguishes between four organizational behaviors (based on the micro-economic theories) in order to explain the organizational choices about three main variables: green production, environmental communication and company's *R&D* approach in terms of environmental protection. Through these four behaviors, the authors categorize companies into four categories: (1) The good speakers: green communication which is not linked to production nor to research. (2) The mute followers: green production which is not linked to communication nor to research. (3) The skimmers: Communication and green production which are not linked to research. (4) The integrators: communication, green production and research. Each of organizational behaviors is justified by some factors that depend on company's choice and/or on stakeholders influence.

The last two models have inspired us to propose "The social disclosure levels model". However, we try to shed the light on the "contexts" in which companies operate. We assume that stakeholders that belong to these different contexts may affect the quantity and quality of communicated (or expected to be communicated) social information by companies.

After giving a presentation of the conceptual and theoretical background of CSR communication, the three levels of our model will be presented with more details, followed by a final conclusion hoping it to be a fertile ground for further researches.

## **2. The Conceptual Background of Corporate Social Communication**

In order to reach a good comprehension about the concept of Corporate Social Communication, first of all, we need to know and understand properly some related concepts that have been the main reasons to generate this kind of communication. Among these concepts, there are two important ones: "Corporate Social Responsibility" and "Stakeholders". CSR represents the main subject of different messages and speeches broadcasted or/and published by a company through this kind of communication. In other words, CSC is a tool used to disclose the company's social responsible politics, values, activities and initiatives.

Regarding the Stakeholders importance, they represent the parties that expect from companies to assume their responsibilities towards them and towards the society's best interest (Peng 2016). Simultaneously, stakeholders are the main targeted audiences and receptors of different societal and/or environmental speeches of business.

*CSR.* The term of "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) remains contested and overlaps with other concepts such as corporate citizenship, sustainable business and business ethics (Young-Sook 2011, 151). However, the most commonly accepted idea about CSR is that a company has to ensure the congruence of its practices with the: current, emergent and future social expectations (Duong 2005, 28). In this context, Carroll believes that the concept of CSR is divergent and always oscillates between two extreme views: the first one reduces this responsibility in favor of the shareholders' benefits, and the second one expands the corporate responsibility to reach many different actors that may have various interests in the company (Duong and Robert-Demontrond 2004).

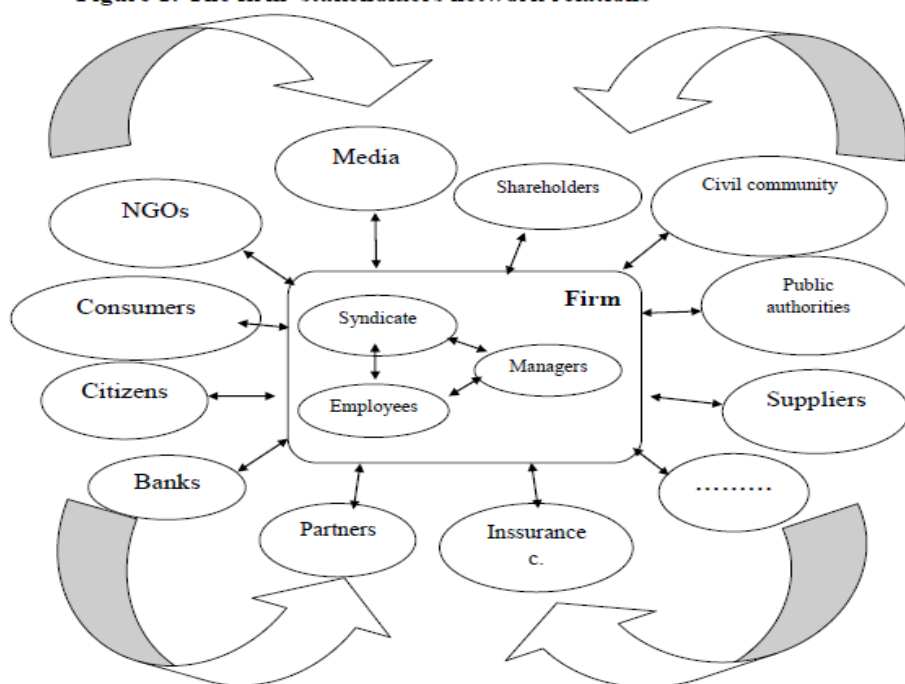
From several attempts to define CSR, the definition proposed by Carroll is the most adopted one, which considered as a basis of many researches carried out later (Schmeltz 2012, 14). Carroll affirms that CSR is constituted by four kinds of responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll 1999, 268). In the "Green Book" of the European Commission (2001), is another perception about CSR. Which is deprived from the economic dimension and considered as firms' voluntary integration of the societal and environmental concerns into their business activities and on their relations with the stakeholder.

To sum up, we believe that Corporate Social Responsibility is linked to the three axes of the Sustainable Development. Which means, to insure its sustainability, business has to be financially strong and to reduce the bad effects of its activities on the environment. Furthermore, a corporation is expected to foster a congruence between its different practices and the social expectations of community (Zieita 2012).

*Stakeholders.* As well as CSR, the Stakeholder's notion does not have the same definition among researchers, academics and managers. This could be due to the different perceptions about the rights and the stakes given to each individual, group or part of these actors (Phillips et al. 2003, 479). These different perceptions, about who the stakeholder is, can be argued by the differences between the political, economic and social environments where companies operate or/and belong; including the specificity of each work field and the nature of each marketplace.

The term “Stakeholders” was brought to light, for the first time, back in 1963, at the “Stanford Research Institute”, where stakeholders were defined as: “those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist” (Freeman 1984, 13). Later in 1984, thanks to Freeman, this term became more popular by giving it a broader vision: “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman 1984, 46). This definition, given by Freeman, became a classic definition of stakeholders (Lépineux 2004), which, regroups all the individuals and groups and even those who do not have the business profile, such as: Associations, NGOs or even citizens who may get affected, for example, by the company’s chemical practices on their living area (Zieita 2012, 96).

**Figure 1: The firm–stakeholders network relations**



**Source:** Y. Zieita, “Corporate external communication about sustainable development: A CSR approach”, Magister thesis, The University of Badji Mokhtar, Annaba, Algeria, 2012, p. 97. (In Arabic)

*Corporate Social Communication.* The usage of the term “Corporate social communication” is not so common among academics. Whereas, many of them prefer using “Corporate social responsibility communication” (Duong 2005; Martin-Juchat 2007; Mark-Herbert and

Von Schantz 2007; Birth et al. 2008; Morsing et al. 2008)<sup>1</sup>. Although the naming differences, most of academics and managers agree, a priori, that corporate social communication is a kind of communication which a company uses to display information about its CSR activities and initiatives (Zieita 2015). However, it is not possible to get a unanimous definition in a wide range. Mette Morsing (2006, 171) sees CSR communication as a communication process, about firm's CSR initiatives, that is designed and distributed by the company itself. However, the aim of adopting this kind of communication by companies is not so clear in this definition (Schmeltz 2012, 25).

Birth et al. (2008, 184) affirm that many academics emphasize that CSR communication aims to provide information which legitimizes an organization's behavior by trying to influence stakeholders' and society's image about the company. We understand, from this definition, that CSR communication contributes in the Social Disclosure process, where corporations publish data in order to enhance their image and to foster/maintain better relationships with their stakeholders and society where they operate and/or belong (Morsing 2006, 171).

To sum up, we suggest that CSC represents a specific communication policy, by which, a company aims to "show" and "highlight" its intentions, actions and initiatives that are derived from the adoption of CSR approach. In order to absorb pressures that can be practiced by the stakeholders who have a direct and powerful influence on its activities (Shareholders, partners, consumers, competitors, banks, government and public authorities...). Moreover, CSR communication can be used as a tool to gain the trust and increase the satisfaction of those who can affect, or even jeopardize, the company's image and reputation such as: media, associations, NGOs and citizens (Zieita 2015, 9).

### **3. Corporate Social Communication within the Stakeholders' Theory**

Stakeholders' theory revolves around the idea that an organization is consisted by individuals and/or groups who represent its internal public. Stimulatingly, organizations operate in: economic, societal, ecological and political environments; which are, consisted by individuals, groups and organizations that can affect or/and be affected on/by the company's different practices (Freeman 1984). In the "affecting, being-affected"

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<sup>1</sup> The author adopts both terms: CSR communication and Corporate Social Communication.



matter between the company and its stakeholders, to insure their sustainability, corporations must handle, wisely, expectations, needs and demands of those actors (Chiu and Wang 2015, 382).

Different stakeholders have many expectations towards the company, which are sometimes alike, contradictory or even conflicting. Shareholders, for example, usually focus on the company's profit maximization (Friedman 1970), so they expect from corporation information about the benefits that the company has gained and the returns of the stocks that they hold. Moreover, shareholders look forward to get data regarding their shares' actual value and even potential future fluctuations that might have impacts on their shares value. Within another context, a consumer's right protection association expects from products (or services) to be compatible with the quality and safety standards. For instance, a product should be up to be consumed (or used) properly, and, also, it should not affect negatively the consumer's health. Thus, a company finds itself required to disclose information that allows it to gain this association's trust, and, also, to minimize the intensity of the "attention" and the "follow-up" that might be exerted by this kind of organizations.

In the case of CSC, communication can be important as a strategic tool, which a company can use as a "shield" that protects from stakeholders' criticism. Furthermore, CSC can be useful to foster a better image towards company's stakeholders (Oxibar 2003, 113). Within the same context, Parker (1986) suggests that a company can take advantage of publishing and disclosing societal and environmental information to anticipate and dodge legislative pressures. Furthermore, it can be used as protection from governmental interventions that might be practiced on the company (Oxibar 2003, 113).

There are two power sources that can feed the firm's will to communicate its CSR actions: the internal power and the external power. (1) *The internal power*: CSR communication can be a result of managers' awareness about the incomes and benefits that the company might gain, in the short medium or long terms, by communicating its social initiatives towards community, and/or its environmental positive, or less negative, impacts on the ecological systems. In other words, companies may carry out "*voluntarily*" a social communication towards their external (or even internal) publics. Therefore, an organization adopts a social communication in order to fulfill a "*self-need*" which is not due to any other party's demand or even pressure to get social information. Managers may choose to carry out a CSR communication in order to improve and/or to maintain the company's image and its good reputation; or to gain more social

legitimacy towards society. Moreover, corporate social communication can be used as strategic tool on the market, by creating more differentiation on the company's products compared with competitors (Arnone et al. 2010, 6). (2) *The external power*: CSR communication, here, might be generated from external pressures or/and demands practiced by external stakeholders. Firm's commitment to disclose societal and/or environmental data can be "*imposed*" by social demands, contracts, laws or agreement. Such as, the French Law of the "New Economic Regulations"<sup>2</sup>. This law represents an obligation to the French listed companies to display, in their annual reports, information about how do they take into consideration the social and environmental impacts of their activities on: society and/or ecological systems. In order to minimize a "severe follow-up" exerted by NGOs or some civil associations/organizations, companies should talk "wisely" about their social initiatives and good intentions. Especially whose activity sector matches NGO's interest field.

#### **4. The Social Disclosure Levels Model**

The "Social Disclosure Levels Model", that we're about to suggest, is inspired from: 1- the four organizational behaviors regarding the environmental communication and research, proposed by Reynaud and Chandon (1998), which are based on micro-economic theories; 2- "Strategic behaviors towards social demands", suggested by Capron and Quairel-Lanoizelé (Attarça and Jacquot 2006). According to what has been mentioned earlier, regarding the perception's diversity of CSR Communication concept among academics and managers; we believe that this perception variety affects how to deal with various topics that may express the company's responsible approach. Moreover, this may lead us to wonder about the quantity and quality of the social information that a company needs (and/or expects) to communicate, within a particular context and/or particular circumstances.

This model focuses on the "quantity" and the "quality" of societal and/or environmental data that a company aims or/and is expected to disclose depending on its environment expectations (stakeholders) and characteristics. We chose to say "to disclose" rather than "to communicate" in order to be more accurate. Disclosure might be characterized by "*selectivity*" and "*caution*" regarding corporate communication about a specific kind of information (Social

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<sup>2</sup> La loi NRE (Nouvelles Régulations Economiques) du Mai 2001, Article 16.

communication). Whereas, regular organizational communication is a distribution of different topics (including CSR) through different channels. Many disclosure practices are linked to: stakeholders' influence, the firm's strategy and to firm's economic performance (Dincer 2011, 71). Therefore, we notice that stakeholders may affect the company's will regarding "how much" (quantity) and how (quality) to communicate its CSR initiatives. Moreover, the depth of stakeholder's impact on the corporation's social disclosure might be related to many factors. Such as: firm's activity area, its size and the legislative, societal and economic climates where the company operates.

This social disclosure levels model suggests three levels regarding corporate social communication: The Full disclosure, the selective disclosure level and the symbolic disclosure.

*The Full Disclosure Level* can be adopted by corporations that communicate heavily their CSR initiatives, by setting a wide range of communication campaigns using different Medias to reach, as much as possible, different targeted stakeholders. This communication represents the real commitment to responsible economic activities, and also to make sure to talk about different societal actions. We suggest that companies that may communicate massively their CSR actions and initiatives might be:

- Companies that operate in a sensitive activity sector where company's activities may have negative impact on the environment (Branco and Rodrigues 2006) or/and society. Stakeholders will request more information about how did this kind of companies take into account the environment and community during the achievement of their organizational and operational objectives. Simultaneously, in order to add more legitimacy on its economic activities, corporation communicates about its responsible approach to prove its good intentions and to reassure its stakeholders, through social information, that its economic and different organizational activities don't have negative impacts (or at least have less negative impacts than usually expected) on both: community and environment.

- A pioneer company in its market and working area, may have its stakeholders' full attention. As a result, a firm might find itself in need to communicate about its different activities, including CSR actions, in order to be up to its different stakeholders' expectations.

- Companies that operate in a society where citizens and consumers have higher awareness regarding environmental and societal matters, which explains why companies, nowadays, are subject to more intense scrutiny than ever (Mark-Herbert and von Schantz 2007, 4). Therefore, society (consumers and other stakeholders) will observe the company's

activities. This consumer's awareness might lead to the involvement of social and environmental variables during their purchases. Aware consumers may expect more and more information about how companies are committed towards the environment and society.

- Companies that belong to marketplaces where competitors do not hesitate to communicate their CSR actions and initiatives. Consumers may have more positive opinions about companies that are involved in CSR than those that are not (Elving 2012, 1). Therefore, a corporation has to be more and more talkative about its responsible actions to keep up with the information's amount exposed by its competitors, in order to maintain its market share and to attract potential responsible consumers (Navicas and Kontautiene 2013).

However, corporations should communicate "wisely" their CSR practices, by assuring a historical congruence between the previous, actual and future messages. Thus, too much CSR communicated data, may lead to stakeholders' (especially consumer's) skepticism because of messages that might be perceived as inconsistent or even unreliable (Villagra and Lopez 2013, 207).

*The Selective Disclosure Level* represents the company's "*selective highlighting*" of some of its CSR initiatives, procedures and/or activities. Within this context, a corporation does not communicate about all (nor even about the most) of its responsible actions. Whereas, companies select just some of their CSR actions; arguing that much communication might increase stakeholders' expectations about CSR, which may rise, consequently their awareness, expectations or/and the degree of severity towards the company's actions. Usually, companies that do not communicate much their CSR actions go unnoticed, whereas the more communicative companies are more likely to be criticized (Villagra and Lopez, 2006).

Corporation might not find it necessary to communicate "all", or the most, of its CSR actions. This choice could be due to many factors:

- When the company finds itself in need to communicate some of CSR actions just to fulfil some legislative obligations. CSC here does not come from the company's own will, it's just a response to regulatory pressure. The best example here is the law of the New Economic Regulations in France, that obliges the listed French companies to talk how they do take into consideration the environmental and/or societal expects, on their annual reports.

- When the corporation operates in a marketplace where the societal or environmental aspects aren't crucial in terms of differentiation on products and services among competitors (Reynaud and Chandon 1998).

- When corporation does not operate within a sector where its activities are considered, by concerned stakeholders, as a threat to environment or the society as a whole.

- If the company does not have enough financial resources that allow it to carry out an overall strategy that combines both: CSR actions and a social communication campaign(s).

Adopting a responsible approach is not enough (Duong 2005), especially when it is not linked to well-designed social communication campaigns. The management that is, only, consistent with regulatory and organizational restrictions, might not allow corporations to keep up with developing stakeholders 'demands. Therefore, a gap might generate between the social cost, estimated by the lawmaker, that a company has to pay, by obeying the law, and the social costs perceived by consumers, which are expected to be considered by the company (Reynaud and Chandon 1998).

*The Symbolic Disclosure Level* is communicating CSR in the absence of real commitment and true adoption of a responsible approach. In other words, the company's social discourses do not match with its practices. Within this context, we have to talk about "Green Washing", which represents the company's communications that attempt to enhance social or environmental commitments despite the absence of actions up to this communication (PNUE 2006, p. 79). The best example here lies in the automobile industry, when manufacturers set green ads to market their products, in spite of the fact that vehicles are considered as one of the main sources of CO<sub>2</sub> (Gerus 2013, 6). Companies may adopt this kind of communication to improve their image and reputation at lower cost (Reynaud and Chandon 1998). Moreover, the lack of expertise of stakeholders and the absence of serious means and procedures to control the reliability of the communicated data, may lead companies to carry out a symbolic green communication (Zieita 2015, 80). According to Capron and Quairel-Lanoizel , companies may communicate about their undertaken philanthropic initiatives that don't belong within their core economic business (Attar a and Jacquot 2006), which can be considered as an act of manipulation or fraud towards their consumers. Consequently, by this symbolic social disclosure, a company might be perceived as opportunist, and this would jeopardize its image, especially in the medium and/or the long term.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The Social Disclosure Levels Model highlights the contexts where companies are operating. Which may determine and justify how and to

what extend a company communicates its CSR practices. A research that we have carried out on Sonelgaz's<sup>3</sup> CSR Communication (Zieita 2012), made us reconsider what may feed the companies' will to communicate their CSR actions. One of the main results that we have got from this study, is that, in spite of the absence of competitors, Sonelgaz undertakes CSR actions and communicates about them. This result has led us to widen our CSR Communication perspective and wonder about what makes Sonelgaz communicate about its CSR actions knowing that it did not have to worry about preserving its market share; What pushes Sonelgaz to disclose CSR information knowing that Algerian citizens are not, so aware about the environmental and societal matters? What feeds Sonelgaz's will to talk about its CSR initiatives knowing that every Algerian house, building, corporation is necessarily a Sonelgaz's customer? Therefore, we assume that Sonelgaz is working in another context that could be different some other company's context that stimulates the need to communicate its CSR actions to fulfill some other objectives. Such as, attracting more responsible potential consumers, seeking to improve the company's competitiveness vis-à-vis its competitors, etc. Thus, a particular context (that includes different stakeholders), may have some particular motives that stimulate a company to communicate its CSR actions. A bank, for example, does not have necessarily to communicate the same way or/and as much as an automobile manufacturer. On the other hand, we believe that communicating CSR is not always a wise choice. Whereas, it would be wiser to spare money and efforts that could be spent on a CSR communication campaign, if the company is already successful and its stakeholders do not really care whether this company is responsible or not.

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<sup>3</sup> Sonelgaz is an Algerian state group that produces, transports and distributes electricity and natural gas. That is the unique company working in this activity area. <http://www.sonelgaz.dz/>

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