# CSR Communication and Cultures of Sustainability

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

First Published in 2023 by The University of Queensland

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DOI: 10.14264/428d81b

eISBN: 978-1-74272-361-7

Please cite as: Weder, F. & Eriksen, M. (2023). *CSR Communication and Cultures of Sustainability*. The University of Queensland, DOI: https://doi.org/10.14264/428d81b

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The University of Queensland, St Lucia QLD, Australia



Photo by Franzisca Weder



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which this project originated. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.



A Guidance Through Time by Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow © The University of Queensland

## About the artwork

Quandamooka artists Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow have produced an artwork that recognises the three major campuses, while also championing the creation of a strong sense of belonging and truth-telling about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, and ongoing connections with Country, knowledges, culture and kin. Although created as a single artwork, the piece can be read in three sections, starting with the blue/greys of the Herston campus, the purple of St Lucia and the orange/golds of Gatton.

The graphic elements overlaying the coloured background symbolise the five UQ values:

- The Brisbane River and its patterns represent our Pursuit of excellence. Within the River are tools used by Aboriginal people to teach, gather, hunt, and protect.
- Creativity and independent thinking is depicted through the spirit guardian, Jarjum (Child in Yugambeh language), and the kangaroo
- The jacaranda tree, bora ring, animal prints, footprints and stars collectively represent honesty and accountability, mutual respect and diversity and supporting our people.

Learn more about The University of Queensland's Reconciliation Action Plan.

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# INTRODUCTION

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

## The lady...

Here she comes, on her bike; wearing a colourful dress, Birkenstocks in orange and blue. 4 kids, chicken in her backyard; no wonder that she's talking about sustainability! She's such a hippie!

Sustainability is a buzz word, a wicked term used and abused to label certain actions – riding on a bike for example. Or choosing a paper straw and walking around with your keep cup.

But sustainability is more than biking or drinking fair trade coffee. And it is more than a company fundraising for a charity or transitioning to renewable energy suppliers. Sustainability is a regulatory idea, a principle of action that has the potential to develop to a universal value. It stands for transformation, for organizations and individuals seeking for orientation in times of crises – climate and health related – and in related socio-economic and socio-ecological transformation processes.

From a terminological perspective, sustainability means *upholding*, and it's born out of the desire of us as humans to continuously exist on this planet for a very long time. Good old Mrs. Brundtland and her colleagues stated in the 1980s that humanity has the ability to further develop "sustainable" – which means to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their very own needs (WCED/BR, 1987). As such, sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony nor an ideal. It is rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, in which the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made future oriented (at least) and consistent with what the present and the future needs.

In the past four decades much happened in this space. Sustainable development is now deeply institutionalized and operationalized in a political, economic and social dimension, and looking at training for transformation managers in museums, the sustainability strategies of media corporations and the growing field of eco-art, also in a cultural dimension.

However, sustainability is still a human made construct and as such an idea and hope to sustain human existence which requires many things including a functioning economic, social and political system *along* with a supportive physical and biological environment. But hey, wait a minute. Along with a 'supportive' physical and biological environment? Does that mean, that sustainability always represents a human

perspective *on* nature? A human perspective about how *we* treat or use nature (natural resources)? The bad news is indeed, that most of the sustainability concepts and related literature confirms this perspective and represents an imbalanced human-nature relationship (human superiority over nature, including protection, conservation etc.).

In this book, we will learn more about sustainability and the responsibility of individuals but much more of organizations to follow sustainability as guiding principle and to cultivate sustainable behavior within the organization and in relation to the organizational environment. A key for any cultivation of sustainability processes – on an individual, micro-level, on an organizational level and on a societal, macro-level is communication. Therefore, with the book at hand we will explore communication *of* sustainability and thus the shiny, pink and glittery new stories of corporations, the story of harmony, reduced CO2 emissions, community engagement and technological innovation. And we will also learn about communication *about* sustainability, represented in colorful and inspiring Instagram-stories, promoting Birkenstock or veganism and presenting eco-warriors and their stories and concerns. Lastly, we will talk about critical and emancipatory forms of communication and about the importance to negotiate the meaning of sustainability within the society and within communities and organizations of all kind and shape.

Thus, this book focuses on communication *of* and *about CSR* and on communication *for* sustainability because despite the journey of sustainability as term since the 1980s, today sustainability isa principle of action that *comes into action with & by communication* – that is not only *communicatively constructed* but also *communicatively cultivated* in our society.

## For Your Orientation

At the beginning of the book, we will also ask the lady mentioned above to stop, we will get her off her bike, we will listen to her, and her thoughts and we will start to put her thoughts into question. We will agonize and problematize, and by doing that we will learn about

- sustainability communicators,
- sustainability stories and best practices of sustainability communication,
- sustainability related audiences,
- cognitive dissonances and harmonization strategies on an individual level,
- as well as the potential to cultivate sustainability as universal value in and through (social) media channels and conversational spaces where sustainability is communicated, debated, and negotiated.

Therefore, we will understand the evolution of the sustainability story as an alternative to the existing story of climate change and ecological destruction and we will be able to explore and learn skills and techniques to take authorship and communicate *of*, *about* and particularly *for* sustainability – and *in a sustainable way*.

# The book

The book is organized in 3 main parts. After the introduction, the first part explores CSR, Sustainability and concepts like ESG and existing research in these areas. The second part brings in a communication perspective and explores the paradigms of communication, from an instrumental perspective on communication to emancipatory communication and a critical understanding of communication processes. The third part brings CSR, Sustainability and Communication together and discusses communication of, about and for sustainability, followed by an outlook with first thoughts on sustainable communication and future challenges for communication experts and researchers.

In detail: The first chapter of the book will look into the context of a current crisis narrative and talk about sustainability and why it matters (1.1.), before we offer a terminological clean up around CSR, Corporate Governance, Sustainable Development and ESG (1.2.). After that, we present current CSR research (1.3.) as well as Sustainability related research (1.4.), before we head into chapter 2.

The second chapter focuses on paradigms of communication and perspectives (2.1.), applications of the paradigms of communication in CSR and Sustainability Communication (2.2.) and discusses if Sustainability Communication is a specific research area (yet) (2.3.).

The third chapter will goe deeper into the three dimensions of sustainability communication, communication of sustainability (3.1.), communication about sustainability (3.2.) and communication for sustainability (3.3.), before we end this book with some guidance for **taking authorship for writing the sustainability story** and creating  a culture of sustainability – in a better and truly transformative way than it is done so far (Outlook).

## In case you want to know more …

For further readings, check the following books and papers:

Weder, F., Krainer, L., & Karmasin, M. (Eds.). (2021). *The sustainability communication reader: A reflective compendium*. Springer Nature.

Diehl, S., Karmasin, M., Mueller, B., Terlutter, R., & Weder, F. (Eds.). (2017). *Handbook of integrated CSR communication*. Springer International Publishing.

Allen, M. (2016). Strategic communication for sustainable organizations. *Theory and Practice. Fayetteville, USA: University of Arkansas*.

Golob, U., Podnar, K., & Zabkar, V. (2022). Sustainability communication. *International Journal of Advertising*, 1-10.

Verk, N., Golob, U., & Podnar, K. (2021). A dynamic review of the emergence of corporate social responsibility communication. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *168*(3), 491-515.

*For our German readers:*

Weder, F. (2022). Nachhaltigkeit kultivieren. Öffentliche Kommunikation über Umwelt, Klima, nachhaltige Entwicklung und Transformation. *Communicatio Socialis (ComSoc)*, *55*(2), 146-159.

# I. CSR, SUSTAINABILITY AND CULTURE

In this first part, you will get a brief introduction into the context of a crisis (I.1) and why organizations are responsible – on a microlevel for their people, on an organizational level for their own sustainability and on a societal level as corporate citizen.

You will also get an idea about key terminology around Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability (I.2.) and learn about the current state of research in both areas, CSR (I.3.) and Sustainability studies (I.4.) to then better understand what role communication plays in both research fields.

# I.1. CONTEXT: CSR, SUSTAINABILITY AND WHY IT MATTERS

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

## The lady...

Many things happened at this day, the day when I saw the lady on her bike for the first time. The morning radio show told me that this was most likely one of the hottest days in October ever, my kids were still angry because I put carrots in their lunchbox and I just got a text message from a friend in Vienna who is still very worried about the ongoing war and political developments in Eastern Europe.

In today's "risk society" (Beck, 2004), the climate crisis is not only about global climate changes and ecological decline but also about the political and communicative capacity of the society to respond (Hackett, 2018). We are in times of a multiple crisis, next to global warming, we are still in a pandemic situation, and political and economic erosion creates a global feeling of insecurity.

We are living in a rapidly changing world, despite some improvement in poverty levels, inequality is rising, conflicts and disaster to humanity is happening around the globe and changes in information and communication technologies (digitalization) accelerate the digital divide, there are still winners and losers of the globalization of communication.

In this multiple-crisis scenario, we experience often rather narrow solutions or individual approaches instead of a system change or cultivation of new principles of action, therefore we are often ineffective to address complex issues in a sustainable way – not only as individuals but also organizations and corporations are often helpless to tackle the diversity of the burning issues today.



Photo by Matt Howard on Unsplash

The crisis narrative is also increasingly visible in public conversations – not only in traditional media formats, but also in social media and direct interactions, one example: The Guardian article. And overview of what is actually happening is available in the most recent IPCC report, or the new "Climate Book" edited by Greta Thunberg.

In the contrary, not so visible, well elaborated and dominant, at least not in public discourses, is the transformation narrative, a narrative that would help us with understanding and performing sustainable development, that would explain socio-ecological transformation processes and make them more tangible. In this first chapter, we will try to entangle the crisis narratives and understand the context of sustainability, social responsibility and transformation.

In the context of a crisis, sustainability is directly related to **social change**. Social change is defined by sociologists as the 'transformation of a culture over time', which can be either deliberate and intended or unplanned, unintentional. Social change and therefore alterations in the very foundational, basic structures can happen on a societal level as well as on a smaller scale, within communities, organizations or institutions.

Its is the rules and resources used and reproduced in social behavior, the value systems and all social relations that change, especially in times of a crisis. Also, some changes are more controversial that others. There are some established sociological theories and perspectives on social change, from rather functionalist theories (Durkheim, 1967, Parson, 1951), to conflict theories (Marx & Engels, 1848) to evolutionary theory (Spencer, 1898). Today, there are various disciplines that explore transformation processes in social values, norms and behavior patterns, from the civil rights movement to the LGBTQ+ movement or the 'green movements', like Friday for Future . There is also a tradition around social development that explores the role of communication in participatory, empowerment strategies mainly in local and rural change situations (check the experts).

Sustainable development is one of the big social transformation processes that we will further explore

in this book, following the idea of structural and 'system change not climate change', further described by UNESCO.




Photo: "FridaysForFuture protest Berlin" by Leonhard Lenzis licensed by CCO Public domain

Sustainable development is the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 43). Sustainability is here not only the goal, the main (regulatory) idea where all activities and processes should be focused on, it is by the same time the principle for action, that guides action. Therefore, sustainable development as societal transformation process is an ethically motivated normative concept that refers to a form of economics, corporate and individual behavior and way of life that does not endanger our future (based on the principle of "strong sustainability"); this requires a transdisciplinary response to captures social change also as cultural change.

In this book, we mainly focus on organizations and how (much) they take responsibility in social transformation processes, and the responsibility which is mostly allocated to big corporations and political institutions by the society, and which is often allocated via communication in public conversations (in the media, predominantly social media). To do that, we need to learn more about the terminology, the differences and concepts behind CSR, corporate governance, sustainability, sustainable development, ESG and more, which we will further explore in the next chapter.

## The lady...

While I walked along the street, massively irritated by the howling sound of a motorbike that woke me up from my thoughts, I looked at the lady. And I decided to ask her one of my burning questions: What is sustainability? A language token, used and abused in advertisement? A philosophical thought? Or a value?

## Further readings ...

Thomas, P. N., & Van de Fliert, E. (2014). *Interrogating the theory and practice of communication for social change: The basis for a renewal*. Springer.

Aguilera, R. V., Rupp, D. E., Williams, C. A., & Ganapathi, J. (2007). Putting the S back in corporate social responsibility: A multilevel theory of social change in organizations. *Academy of management review*, *32*(3), 836-863.

Powell, W. W. (2019). The transformation of organizational forms: How useful is organization theory in accounting for social change?. In *Beyond the marketplace* (pp. 301-329). Routledge.

# I.2. SUSTAINABILITY, CSR, ESG AND MORE: TERMINOLOGICAL CLEAN UP

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

## The lady...

I stopped the lady on the bike; I made her to put her Birkenstock-shod foot on the asphalt, glowing from the heat. It was one of those days in the tropical south of our planet, one of those days where the city we live in glitters brightly in the sun, the hot air shimmers and the humidity reaches into the marrow of our bones. She looked at me with her brown eyes, tiny little laugh wrinkles amplified her bright smile. I asked her: You look like someone who can finally tell me what sustainability is. She looks at her bike, wiped tiny beads of sweat of her temples and said – well, it's a matter of how I use my own resources to climb up this hill – will I use all my power, then I will not be able to climb the next hill; it's a bit of an interplay between me, my bike and my power and the road and the hills. Sustainability needs a holistic process of thinking, it also implies the consideration of how much my actions impact other people and the environment.

A bit more sophisticated, sustainability is a principle that (re)connects people with the planet following the principle of sufficiency (which by the way has been included for the first time in the IPCC report) – but not without including the aspect of efficiency, the aspect of resources that can be used and thus an economic dimension (see the following definition).

**Sustainability**

the ability to be maintained at a certain rate or level.

Or even more precise: avoidance of the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance.

Sustainability is often described as a idea that is used to look at social, environmental or economic issues or behavior, or to explore the intersections of those three dimensions, for example challenges at the intersection of the social and economic dimension around *social equity and equality* or of economic and environmental interests and the question of *viability*. This goes back to the so called 'triple bottom line' or there dimensional model of sustainability, that captures the there domains where sustainable development should be realized guided by sustainability a principle:

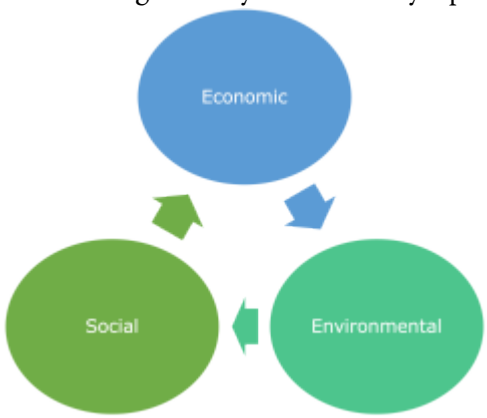



Figure: "Three dimensions" by Franzisca Weder 2023

Sustainability, thus, is first of all a *term* that describes the "ideal" or balance between what is possible and what is reasonable, between what we need to exist considering future generations and their needs (UN, 2020; Weder et al., 2021). But sustainability goes further than the description of a certain status quo of 'balance', or resource security. Sustainability has also developed into a *guiding principle*, a principle of action that stimulates organizations of all kind and individuals to become better stewards of the environment, the society as a whole and the future. It inspires action and communication about how to combat specifically climate change and imbalances – in all dimensions. The process of getting there is described as *sustainable development*:

**Sustainable development**

development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Sustainable development includes all processes and structures that follow the principle of sustainability – or, the other way around, sustainability is the principle that guides actions that are part of a social transformation process that is labeled as sustainable development.

There is a set of goals, developed by the United Nations, which emerged from the first written Report dealing with the principle of growth – so called Brundlandt report (Our Common Future). The 17 goals are colorful and cover the whole breadth of sustainability issues; it works as a framework for political and organizational action.




Image: "Sustainable development goals", United Nations, Own work using: File:Sustainable Development Goals.png and PDF infographic from un.org, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

While sustainability is often described from an environmental perspective and thus used as synonym for "green" or resource-orientation, the SDGs represent not only the intersections and dependencies of the three dimensions (ecological, social and environmental); much more, they show that there is actually not one area of the society that is not included in the big transformation, called sustainable development.

## The lady...

I asked the lady, still staring at her dress fluttering in the wind: And who is responsible for that? The lady looked at me and asked back: what do you think? And I was immediately torn apart between on the one hand blaming big corporations for being too much focused on their economic growth, blaming governments being jinxed by lobbyist and capitalism, politicians making short-term- and election-focused decisions and blaming the system, our market-driven economy and consumption. On the other hand, I felt that I'm responsible for choosing organic bananas – or no bananas at all, at least living in a non-banana producing country. I am responsible for taking the bus or bike instead of a car and choosing the paper straw for my Acai-smoothie.

Considering that sustainable development connects the past with the future and gives us an idea of how the future not only can look like but needs to look like, we need to talk about **responsibility** first. Responsibility is – generally spoken – a relational term. Responsibility is allocated and taken. Therefore, responsibility relates one organization to another (or to their stakeholder or audiences), two individuals to each other (mother – child) or even an individual to an organization (researcher – University). This thinking goes back to the German philosopher Imanuel Kant and his idea of 'imputation' in the sense of an attribution or assignment of responsibility (1968) from one individual to another or one person to a broader structural complex (i.e., group, team, organization, or 'the society'). However, responsibility is never a moment of security or cognitive certainty, instead it comes with the 'removal of grounds', and

the withdrawal of rules or knowledge on which we rely to make our decisions (think about a political crisis, stakeholder expectations that no one was considering, or the United Nations coming along with sustainable development goals and challenging business of all kind and size etc.). While responsibility-relationships are stable, the roles of responsibility are rather fluid (someone is in charge – but it is not necessarily the manager him or herself).

## The lady...

At this point, the lady stared back at me; her brown eyes were looking deep into my heart – as she said: "Think about your moral agency – it is directly related to and realized in a specific role or within interactions between complementary roles". I secretly consulted my phone: moral agency ... it apparently means that I'm able to make choices and decisions based on a basic understanding of what is right and wrong – and an understanding that I'm actually accountable for the decisions and related actions.

Moral agency can be interpreted as 'normative competence' (Wallace, 1994); this involves the ability to grasp and apply moral reasoning, and to govern one's behavior by the light of such reason. This means, that certain roles come along with a certain responsibility – which we can call role related responsibility: "responsible agents are not those agents whose actions are un-caused, but rather those agents who possess certain competences or capacities" (Vincent et al., 2011: p. 1f.). This would imply that the competences and functions of allocating and taking responsibility are clear; the more they are institutionalized, the easier they can be realized through interactions and for example particular communicative acts. A business manager has agency, because there are certain responsibilities institutionalized and therefore connected to his leadership role; in his role he can take moral agency in being a role model and lead the organization ethically.

## Case study



Photo: "Josef Zotter" by Winfried Weithoferis licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

This is **Josef Zotter**, Chocolatier, Eco-farmer and "out-of-the-box-thinker". His chocolate company is one of the outstanding examples of sustainable leadership and business in Austria and Europe. His holistic concept goes back to his very personal decision to use only eco- and fair-traded resources for his chocolate products; he even goes further:

– solar power & geothermal energy: the whole production of Zotter chocolate relies on renewable energy; the peal of the chocolate beans is not thrown away; they are used in a steam power plant to generate heat and are used to fertilize the environmental surroundings of the factory.

– employees: every employee gets a free organic lunch with food from the own garden/farm, aligned to the factory.

– packaging & waste: no glas and no plastic is used in the fabric and for the packaging of the chocolate, instead, they rely on Biomat/renewable commons (Naturabiomat) and eco-friendly paper & printing colors

– e-mobility: all cars of the Zotter-fleet are e-cars, as well, visitors can re-fuel their e-vehicles at the local "power-bank".

– EMAS certificate, Trigos-price receiver, partner of the Austrian climate consortium: Zotter is engaged in national and international sustainability networks and receiver of various eco-labels/ certificates and prizes.

– in his private life, Josef Zotter lives self-sufficient, relying on his garden and network of farmers.

The case study shows a great examples of individual agency, moral agency to be more specific. However, without any structure or framework, individual ethics and ethical leadership can hardly take place.

In other words, the less structure or legal frameworks exist which allocate and define the agency for taking and allocating responsibility, the less attention is given to the constructive potential of communication when it comes to a moral framework, a common understanding and realization of role-related moral agency. Thus, even the broad discussion about virtue ethics or individual ethics in the area of business ethics (further read: Whetstone, 2001, Moore, 2005) is only one side of the coin.

Responsibility – especially from a sustainability perspective – is not only focused on the near field of a person. Hans Jonas, one of the most famous philosophers talking about responsibility, pointed out that it is important to think further – and include the responsibility towards our ancestors as well as future generations, towards other and distant cultures, and that "charity" and "altruism" can be transformed into "distant-love", complementing Kant's ethical imperative (imputation) with an ecological imperative, bringing in responsibility related to *time* and *space*.

This is the link to not only the idea or concept of sustainable development towards a better future, but also to the concept of *Corporate Social Responsibility*. Organizations are structurally embedded in the society – first of all, they are connected to their stakeholders. Considering a (more sustainable) future, organizations are responsible for maintaining their business (economic responsibility), their members/ employees (social responsibility) and environment, resources and neighborhood (environmental responsibility). The official definition of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) comes from the World Business Council:

**CSR**

is perceived as "the continuing commitment by business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the community and society at large" (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 1998).

CSR, similar to sustainability, is often subdivided into three dimensions of responsibilities: social, economic and environmental responsibilities. Together, these three dimensions constitute the so-called triple bottom line of CSR (Elkington, 1994). IN most of the CSR concepts, sustainability is described as the principle of action that drives engagement and the development of management concepts and programs when an organization wants to take their responsibility (see fig.).

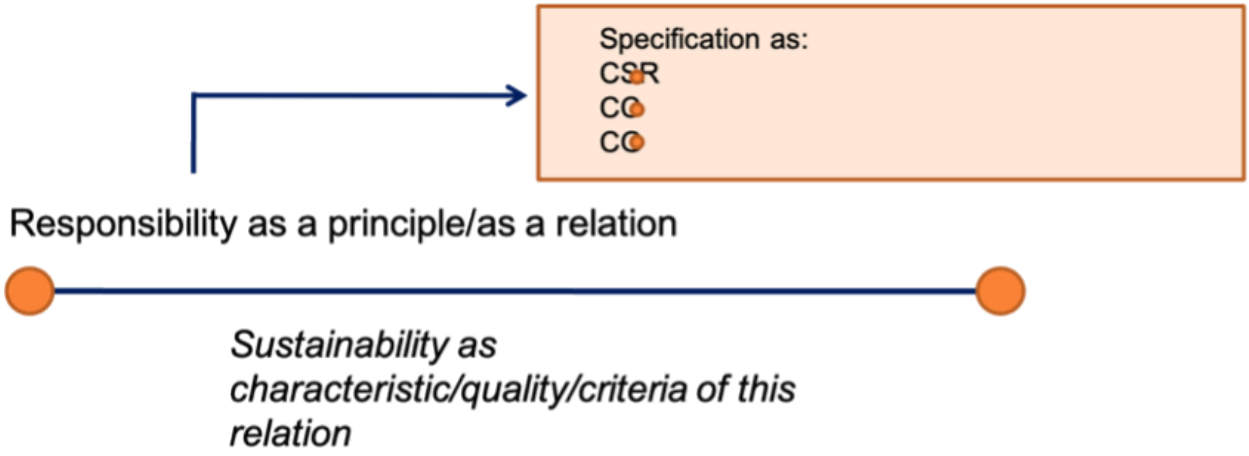



Figure: "CSR and sustainability" by Franzisca Weder 2023

Fig. 1 shows, that however the responsibility of an organization towards the society is described (CSR, Corporate Citizenship etc.), responsibility describes the relationship between an organization and its stakeholder, sustainability describes why and how this responsibility can and should be taken, the 'quality'. Sustainability as normative framework or regulatory idea determines the character of and the criteria used to evaluate the relationships.

If sustainable development is what drives an organization, which is institutionalized in the organizations' or corporations' goals, then this creates certain responsibilities – for the environment (to treat resources in a certain way), for the society and individuals (make employees want to stay) and for the organization and maintaining the organization itself (economic responsibility). This is further explained with the following example:

## Case Study



Photo by Franzisca Weder 2023

This is Billy, probably the most famous bookshelf on earth. You can get Billy at IKEA, a company that is apparently doing quite well in 2021, not only but mainly because of a scandal regarding the wood they used for creating Billy and his furniture-friends some time ago.

Today, they seek to create a positive impact with everything they do and are a forerunner in terms of customer engagement and recycling; 98% of the wood used for IKEA products now comes from more sustainable sources (FCS-certified/or recycled), supporting human rights in their partner countries – but communicating it as being on an exciting journey – and not there yet. Even if they inspire people to recycle their products and raise awareness, still their main challenge is and will be responsible sourcing, a sustainability issue at the core.

Not only IKEA, but all corporates with 500 or more employees, need to report their activities (Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards); the most common examples for CSR activities are: reducing carbon footprints, improving labour policies – and expecting their stakeholder to do the same – participating in fairtrade, charitable giving, community engagement/volunteering, and institutionalizing corporate policies that benefit the environment and go for socially and environmentally conscious investments.

However, recently the so-called triple bottom line of CSR, which is represented in the dimensions of social, economic, and environmental responsibilities that are allocated to organizations of all kinds and taken by

(most of) them, has been further developed for instance by bringing in a fourth dimension – or to rather get away from the three dimensions, pillars or perspectives to a more circular model (see figure below).

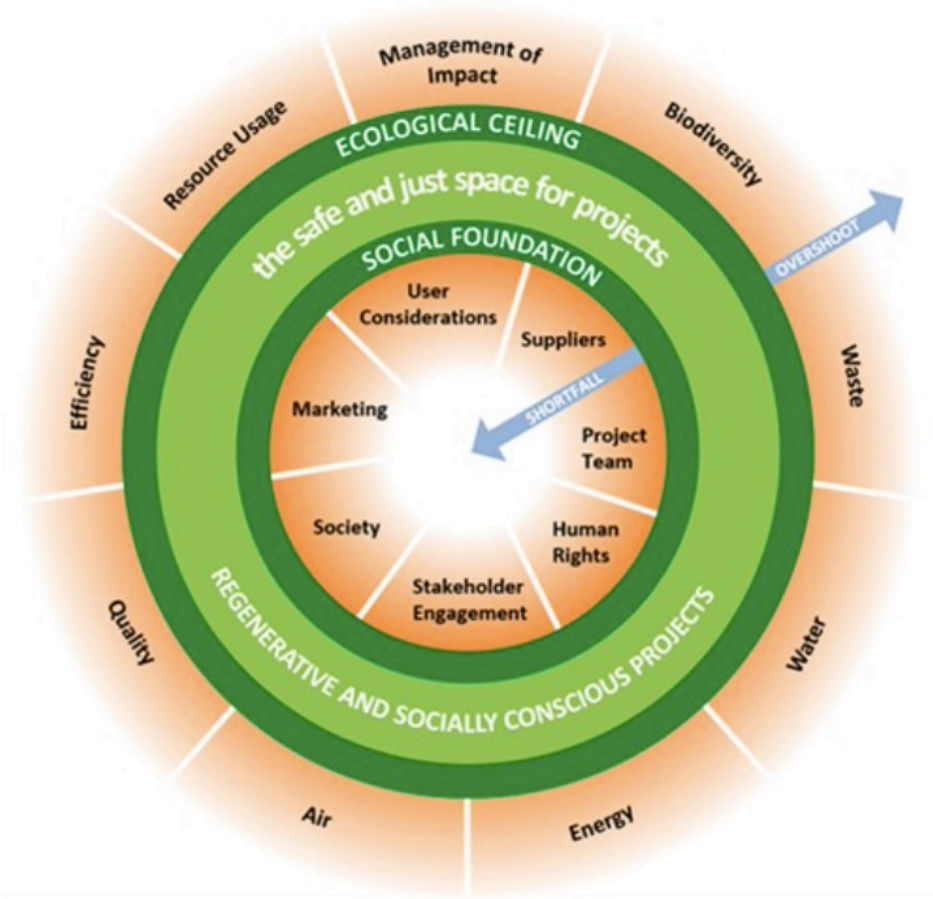



Figure: "Doughnut Economics", by DoughnutEconomics, is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

The Doughnut consists of two concentric rings; the inner circle is the social foundation. It describes the dimensions and related considerations that ensure that no one is left falling short on life's essentials. The outer circle is the ecological ceiling, that marks the dimensions that should help to ensure that humanity does not collectively overshoot the planetary boundaries that protect Earth's life-supporting systems. From a sustainability perspective, any action (projects, activities, organizational behavior) should happen between those two boundaries, in the so called "safe and just space". The doughnut model was developed by the Oxford economist Kate Raworth, its main goal is to re-frame economic problems and set new goals and adding measures such as jobs, education, food, access to water, health services and energy helps to accommodate an environmentally safe space.

The doughnut model still represents an economic and therefore resource oriented perspective on nature. However, there are other disciplines and perspectives that further developed the three-dimensional sustainability thinking, adding for example a cultural or communicative dimensions to CSR and sustainability.

## The lady …

I was confused and suddenly recognized that I was standing next to an ant nest; shaking my leg didn't really help … I had to move around the lady with the bike to get away from the ants without interrupting the conversation.

What was that? Is there a fourth pillar of sustainability?

Yes. A cultural dimension for sure. Several scholars have worked with and on the three pillars or dimensions of sustainability. The most prominent attempts to expand on this triangle are those who conceptualize 'culture' in its different meanings in sustainability. A cultural perspective on sustainability can either be that culture is the fourth pillar and therefore, we need to conserve, maintain and preserve cultural capital in different forms as arts heritage, knowledge and cultural diversity for the next generations (Soini & Dessein, 2016) (see fig., first diagram). There is a second stream of thinking, that refers to culture as mediating the other three dimensions; culture (material and immaterial) play an essential role as a resource for economic development, cultural values need to be considered in all the other dimensions. Lastly (also in fig.), there is a more holistic perspective that conceptualizes culture itself as sustainability which leads us to our understanding in this book. From this holistic perspective, sustainability is embedded in our culture it is cultivated and normalized and leads us through transformation processes and to an eco-cultural civilization.

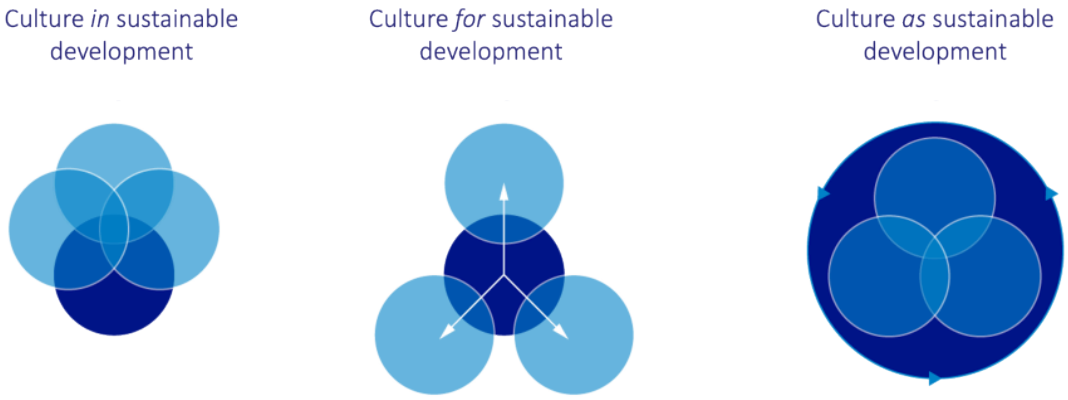



Figure: "Culture and sustainable development" by Franzisca Weder

This cultural perspective is not the only way of criticizing the "dimensions" or "pillars" of responsibility and sustainability.

Is communication also a dimension that we have to talk about sustainability and responsibility? There have been attempts to discuss communication as forth pillar, similar to the cultural approaches discussed above. Even communication needs to be responsible and sustainable. And by the same time, from a more

holistic perspective, communication does play a role in realizing sustainability in all the other dimensions, i.e. in the following figure.

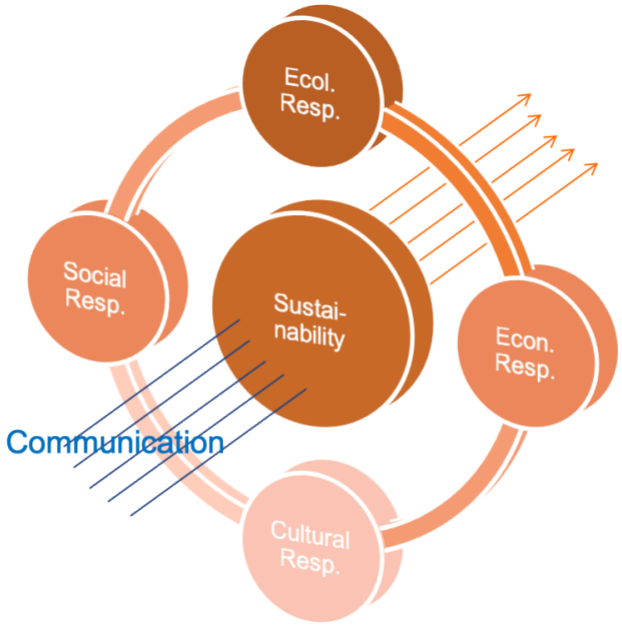



Figure: "Communicative responsibility" by Franzisca Weder (based on Weder and Karmasin, 2008)

We summarize, that CSR encompasses all the practices including communication put in place by companies in order to uphold the principles of sustainable development (see above). This means that companies and organizations of all size and orientation need to be economic viable (and sustainable), but by the same time have a positive impact on society and respect, preserve and get engaged with the environment – in an ecological, space, social as well as communication dimension. In short:

**CSR, sustainability & communication**

management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and communicate interactions with their stakeholders. Sustainability guides the action, practices and programs.

Managing responsibility, that is allocated to organizations, can include several elements like implementing an ethical code, appointing an ombudsman or ethical commission and CSR or sustainability manager, establishing an ethics hotline and communicating about the code internally, installing a management tactics (fundraising, community engagement etc.) as well as communicating CSR activities publicly. The last point is of particular importance since the social and environmental commitments of organizations then offer communicative opportunities "to strengthen the social reputation and consequently the entire reputation of an organization" (Schmitt and Röttger, 2011; Röttger et al., 2014; Weder, 2020). Communication is not only inseparable from a **responsibility-based management concept (CSR)**,

much more, sustainability as principle of action can only be realized with communication – and by communicating about it -but we learn much more about that in chapter III.

Before this chapter end, we need to explain new concepts, like for example "Environmental and Social Governance" (ESG).

ESG is a concept of framework that is used to monitor and report on activities, projects and investments based on corporate policies; the idea is to make responsible behavior and activities towards the SDGs **measurable** and **visible** – and thus, to encourage companies to act responsibly.

There are again three dimensions to the overarching concept of ESG:

- environmental dimension (criteria, which include corporate climate policies, energy use, waste treatment and the treatment of animals)
- social dimensions (criteria that cover the organization's relationship with stakeholders, includes donations, engagement, volunteering, supply chain sustainability and ethics)
- governance dimensions (ethical accountability, following reporting standards.

ESG emphasizes publicity, transparency, and accountability by combining these three non-financial elements and considering them in all areas of a company's activities (Galbreath, 2013). Thus, ESG should have a positive effect in generating long-term – or sustainable – profits, enhancing corporate value, and improving social reliability (Provasnek et al., 2017).

## To summarize:

CSR is the rather idealistic, big-picture perspective on sustainability, and ESG is the practical, detail-oriented perspective on 'realizing' the SDGs. Thus, CSR can be seen as the precursor to ESG. Companies self-regulate and commit to sustainable practices with the aim of making a positive impact on society.

Sustainability is the umbrella that CSR & ESG fall under – and contribute to. ESG and CSR are ways that businesses can demonstrate their commitment to sustainable business practices.

# I.3. CURRENT CSR RESEARCH - AND WHERE IT COMES TO AN END

Franzisca Weder

In the previous chapter, we summarized the terminological clean up by saying that CSR is the rather idealistic, big-picture perspective on sustainability, while "ESG" is the practical, detail-oriented perspective on organizational behavior, action and projects and thus on 'realizing' the SDGs.

CSR can also be seen as the precursor to ESG, that stimulates corporations and institutions to self-regulate and commit to sustainable practices with the aim of making a positive impact on society. Sustainability is the guiding principle, ESG and CSR are ways that businesses and organizations can demonstrate their commitment to sustainable business practices.

This is not only debated in communication practice, public relations and consulting, but also in research. Approaches and concepts around business responsibilities are mostly developed in the research area called "business ethics". In this chapter, we will briefly discuss research that is done in this field and try to identify the first theoretical concepts for "Corporate Social Responsibility"; we will also discuss where this research comes to an end and requires a communication perspective, which will be briefly introduced and further deepened in part III.

## The lady...

Ethics ... what a word! It gives you the feeling of being super important, belonging to an intellectual elite, the feeling of having ancient Greek philosophers tapping on your shoulders and asking you questions that you actually can't answer. Questions around what is good and what is bad behavior – and who tells us that a certain behavior is bad? Why do we blame and shame people dropping their waste in nature and admire the avocado-sourdough-toast that is presented to us on Instagram by a sustainability vegan influencer. Why do we blame the big corporations and bottlers like Coca-cola but grab a Sprite if it's 35 degree and humid at the beach? I asked the lady about this, and she said that was I was just doing is already "doing ethics", it is actual philosophizing. Ethics means critique, questioning and reflection, and evaluating a certain behavior as bad or good.

There are various forms of and approaches to ethics, from rather descriptive and empirical ethics (focused on explanation and description of morality) to normative ethics, which focuses on exactly what we were talking about with the lady, the evaluation and justification of certain behavior or action, the reasoning of normative principles – like sustainability. There are other forms of more or less specific forms of ethics, which you can further explore with Introduction to ethics.

## The lady...

"I do remember something", I said to the lady. "In school, when we read fables and fairy tales, there was always a "moral" or the story, something that we learn to do or not to do." The lady nodded and said "yes, being good is something we are taught as children, and examples are given. These moral principles are always linked to a larger normative framework, a framework that guides our behavior, our interactions with others, with the environment and also with nature – which is mostly dependent on or at least related to a specific cultural context; religion, the political system and the degree of development in the social and cultural context we're embedded in is also very influential".

This is why you labeled me as environmentally conscious and "good" from a sustainability perspective, knowing that – at least in our social context – biking is something that is framed as "good for the environment".

Moral regulates normative needs of a society and defines what is binding; therefore, it gives social stability. While ethics refers to the rules that a social system provides us and the processes of reflection that are aligned with these rules, morals are more our own principles, the principles that are more applicable, easier to use in the evaluation of a "bad friend", who corrupts these moral principles.

**Ethics and morality**

Ethics is the reflection-theory of morality, the **process of reflection** related to the question: What is good and what is bad behaviour? Moral is the set of societal norms, and value principles

At this point, we want to look at sustainability again, being a both a normative concept that **indicates**

**a desirable state of the social world based on justice and individual quality of life** on the one hand, and a functional concept that indicates that basic functional requirements must be fulfilled to secure the lives of present and future generations, articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals. The idea of sustainability is intrinsically normative (if you want to read more on that, read Modeling normativity in sustainability: A comparison of the sustainable development goals, the Paris agreement, and the papal encyclical). Thus, understanding the role of normativity in sustainability discourses is crucial for the idea of organizations playing a central role in the society – and being responsible for fulfilling the requirement to secure the lives of present and future generations!

The area that dealt with these questions is business ethics and now increasingly so called 'CSR research'. Let's have a brief look at both areas and what is happening in the CSR space.

## Good to know about… Business Ethics:

Business ethics is a form of applied ethics or professional ethics. This means that business ethics as a field of practice but even more as research area examines ethical principles and moral or specific ethical problems that can arise in organizations of all kinds and specifically in corporations and business environments.

Thus, business ethics It applies to all areas of an organizations and all aspects of a business, it includes organizational and individual behavior and action!

The term business ethics goes back to first publicly debated cases of corporate misconduct (1970s); one reaction was the emergence of the first 'social responsibility programs', which at this early time included mostly charitable donations and funding local community projects. By the same time, business schools started to incorporate courses on responsible management and 'social responsibility', which has been picked up by philosophers which helped to further institutionalize business ethics as academic field of research and discipline, with professorships and chairs, study programs and journals as well as an own body of concepts and theories.

Since the beginning and a focus on managers and 'the businessmen' (Bowen, 2013), who should make moral sound decisions and choices not only in business activities but also in non-business activities, the perspective is much broader today and includes different approaches to the ethical practice of business and organizations in general.

One of the biggest questions still is: what comes first, business and therefore commercial interests, following a capitalistic logic, or ethical behavior and related norms as framework for any kind of behavior, including any corporate or business related action. Here, the stakeholders come into play with their expectations with one of their main concerns being whether or not the business is behaving ethically or unethically; thus, most theoretical

approaches today represent an integrated understanding of business & ethics, and there is common sense that all **actions and decisions of a business should be primarily ethical before it happens to become an ethical or even legal issue**.

## Good to know about … CSR Studies:

Since Bowen declared the social responsibility of a business man (1953 / 2013), much happened around corporate's responsibility – one of the most important changes in perspective has been Friedman's 1970 critique and the introduction of the stakeholder perspective or the development of stakeholder theory.

Stakeholder theory implies a new perspective on business and, more broadly, on organizations of all kind, which understands an organization as deeply embedded in the society and stresses the interconnected relationships between an organization and its employees, customers, suppliers, investors, competitors, neighborhood, communities and other groups, organizations or institutions, who have a 'stake' in the organization. The core of stakeholder thinking and theory is that an organization and business in particular should create value for all stakeholders, not just their shareholders.

In the early 1980s, R. Edward Freeman developed the first models mapping stakeholders; meanwhile, this thinking is deeply embedded in how organizations think and act, with practitioners, consultants and scholars around the world continuing to emphasize the sustainability of focusing on all stakeholders values and gain as the most fundamental objective of business. Stakeholder theory is also the basis of most CSR theories, addressing the responsibility of corporates and organizations towards the society through a variety of methodological and theoretical lenses, drawing on a diverse set of research contexts and paradigmatic approaches. Today, CSR related research is highly fragmented, however, CSR still works as umbrella term for the debate around the role of organizations in the society and their impact in a social, environmental and economic dimension – with either a stronger business or a stronger society-centric focus.

Early work to read are papers written by Carroll (2016), Matten & Moon (2008), Scherer & Palazzo (2011) focussing more on political and institutional context, or more recent work focussed on SME's (Morsing & Spence, 2019), see most recent overview written by Velte (2022).

Key in business ethics, CSR and sustainability studies is the question around **responsibility**. Again, there is a bunch of philosophical work around responsibility (i.e., which most of all describes responsibility as relational term). Also, responsibility can be either forward looking, prospective: in this case, responsibility is an obligation, from an organizational perspective it includes behavior and action that secures the license to operate. Alternatively, responsibility is conceptualized as retrospective, this includes from an organizational perspective behavior, action and communication that justifies past behavior and legitimizes current projects or actions.

Responsibility is the core dynamic that binds stakeholder to an organization – or the other way around, that connects a business to its stakeholder. Responsibility is either allocated towards an organizations or taken by the organization. This is further described in the concept of corporate social responsibility, previously defined in chapter I.2, and further debated in CSR related and business ethics research (see above).

Important for the context of this book and a focus on CSR and sustainability communication is: the responsibility of an individual or an organization can be evaluated along the following questions:

**Dimensions of responsibility**

**Who** is responsible (i.e. a corporate, an organization or the CEO)

...for **what** (i.e. a certain product, that the product or the organization itself is relevant for the society and acts beyond legal requirements and compliance)

... to **whom** (i.e. the society, the community, the employees, the customers or future generations)?

So going back to what we discussed in the previous chapter(s): CSR has to be differentiated from sustainability! While sustainability is a guiding principle for action and behavior, CSR describes the structures and the linkages between organizations and every individual, group or organization that has a stake in the organization. This can be further explored with the literature listed below, before we discuss sustainability and how it has been studied and theorized so far in the next chapter.

## Further reading

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Carroll, A. B. (2016). Carroll's pyramid of CSR: taking another look. *International journal of corporate social responsibility*, *1*(1), 1-8.

Crane, A., Matten, D., Glozer, S., & Spence, L. J. (2019). *Business ethics: Managing corporate citizenship and sustainability in the age of globalization*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Freeman, R. E. (1991). Business ethics: The state of the art.

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Matten, D., & Moon, J. (2008). "Implicit" and "explicit" CSR: A conceptual framework for a comparative understanding of corporate social responsibility. *Academy of management Review*, *33*(2), 404-424.

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Journal of Business Ethics

# I.4. CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH - AND WHERE IT COMES TO AN END

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

While CSR research is pretty established especially with Business Ethics as highly institutionalized research area, with publications, chair, University programs and experts, the so called 'sustainability studies' are less established or do have a different character as research program or field.

## The lady...

Maybe sustainability can't be studied, I thought to myself. Of course it's easy to philosophize about responsibility or 'good' and 'bad' behavior; but how can we study something like sustainable development which basically describes a potentially well needed change process of the society or mainly our economic system?

The lady opened her colorful bag that she had put next to a tree at the sidewalk. She fetched a book called "The Climate Book", written and edited by Greta Thunberg. Dark and light blue stripes on the cover slowly morphed into dark red stripes, signaling a certain urgency. "This one is a great example of how important it is to complement different perspectives on a crisis to be able to speak not only about the problems but also about the solutions. Academic research, great theories, scientific data – that all well needed. But by the same time we need to think about what we do with this data, how to manage change. Not only you or I, but also politicians, countries, communities and organizations of all kind and shape."

I sighed, "apparently sustainability is nothing that can be explained from one perspective nor is there a specific answer to the question of how to get to a more sustainable future – neither by one specific field, academic discipline, political party or economic actor".

Sustainability, and Sustainable Development, have become core issues in several fields across the globe. Environmental management and urban / regional planning are some examples of areas where sustainability has become a key consideration (Mog, 2004). The growth of sustainability and sustainable development is relatively recent, primarily occurring over the past three decades, as mentioned in chapter 1.2. It began early in the 1990s, as the new millennium approached (Mensah, 2019).

What fueled the growth and spread of the idea of sustainability? Lam et al. (2014), Purvis et al. (2019), and Mensah (2019) argue that it was ushered in by multiple key initiatives implemented by the United Nations, and an interwoven crisis of global concerns. This larger crisis is made up of various crises including, but not limited to, climate change, human rights issues, economic inequality, and the gradual depletion of the world's resources.

In 1983, Gro Harlem Brundtland was tasked with establishing and chairing the World Commission on Environment and Development. The Commission's work over four years culminated in the development of the "Our Common Future" report, which was released in 1987 (Purvis et al., 2019). With hindsight, this report had a clear, traceable influence throughout multiple key initiatives and events spanning decades of sustainable development efforts and research. Firstly, it established a clear definition for sustainable development, which was later adopted widely by the international community. This allowed a consensus to be reached in future events and initiatives as to what the aim of sustainable development would be. Secondly, it laid out the core pillars of business and policy decisions – but also for related academic research and an institutionalization of sustainability related studies.

Let's go back to the definition, outlined by the *Our Common Future* report was as follows:

**Sustainable Development**

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (United Nations Documents).

The definition of sustainable development was adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. Furthermore, the recommendations forming the basis of discussion and debate at the conference and beyond – in business practice, political discourse and academic research. This resulted in several supportive outcomes for the promotion of sustainable development, including the so called 'Agenda 21' (Jain & Islam, 2015) which states: "Sustainable Development should become a priority item on the agenda of the international community" (United Nations). The impact of which was key to the acceleration of sustainability and sustainable development research and business / policy adoption in the following 20 years (Hadorn et al., 2006).

With this in place, discourse in various sectors of society grew and evolved while slowly shifting from a focus of the environmental impacts of human activity to an increasing focus on social impacts (Seuring and Muller, 2008). In 2015, the UN introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). As described in chapter 1.2, the SDGs are clustered in 17 'goals' that are to be achieved in the span of 15 years, from 2015 to 2030. Still, 2030 is the 'deadline' communicated for many projects in organizations, communities and in the corporate world in particular.

The SDGs were created in accordance with opinions and knowledge of governments, institutions, organizations, and international experts and researchers, as well as the submissions and opinions of millions

of people around the world. Not only do the SDGs set the global standard for sustainable development, but they also set the standard in closely related fields, including CSR frameworks and plans.

The SDGs were established to address the complex, and interwoven current and future issues facing the globe. In this, they also address the same overarching goals of CSR, which is the welfare of society as a whole and the responsibilities that are allocated from certain groups of the society to institutions, organizations and especially business.

The Climate Disclosure Standards Board (CDSB), the Community Development Program (CDP), the International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC), and The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) all utilize the SDGs as their foundation; we will further elaborate on these guidelines in chapter 3 when we talk about CSR and Sustainability Reporting and communication *of* sustainability (Shayan et al., 2022).

For the considerations in this book at hand, the development of the SDGs over the past decades shows that dealing with sustainable development and the future of our society in a multiple crisis situation is always 'transdisciplinary', which means at the intersection of research, conceptualization, change development and framework building on the one hand and an application in organizations or the realization of related projects and activities within and through organizations, institutions and corporates. The following Case Study is one example for the collaboration between industry, political institutions and academia.

## Case Study

One example of a global issue related to sustainable development is that of methane production from cattle farming. In Australia, methane emissions emitted by livestock is estimated to be around 10% of Australia's total greenhouse emissions (CSIRO, 2022).

Future Feed Pty Ltd is an Australian organization established by CSIRO with funding support from a variety of Australian industrial and commercial partners. Future Feed holds the global IP rights to an innovative feed technology using a specific type of seaweed, known as Asparagopsis, to reduce methane production from cattle (Future Feed, 2021).

It was developed following a discovery by a farmer in Canada that his cattle were feeding on seaweed. Dr Rob Kinley and his team at CSIRO, in collaboration with Meat and Livestock Australia, and James Cook University worked together to create the method for producing this new type of feed (CSIRO, 2022). It is a great example of business and research organisations combining to develop an innovative solution to a global problem.

But how to 'study' sustainability?

As mentioned before, alongside to countless reports, conceptual papers, industry communication efforts and policy documents, sustainability was increasingly discussed, researched and theorized in academia. The search for research approaches dealing with sustainability lead to the so called 'Sustainability Studies' (see Meyers 2012; Lam et al. 2014). After years of various disciplines dealing with sustainability and sustainable development, 'Sustainability Studies' were introduced around 2000 as specific discipline to explore the concept of sustainability; related University programs or schools looks at sustainable development, ethics and business ethics (see chapter 1.3.) in particular, regional planning and climate change, poverty and development as well as social change.

The most interesting development that happened with the introduction of 'Sustainability Studies' as demarcated research and academic field was that it brought along a paradigm change towards human-nature relationships. This means that all research and theorization happens in relation to societal, cultural and ecological crises, particularly the climate crisis, and always with an inter- and transdisciplinary character, which means following an "integrated approach to cooperative problem-solving" (Godemann/ Michelsen 2011, S. 5; Krainer/Weder 2011).

Connecting this with the considerations related to sustainable development always linking industry, political institutions, communities, civil society and academia, we can also state that sustainability also links various disciplines and research areas within academia: from business and economics, to geography and tourism, environmental management and media and communication studies; sustainability studies as such remind researchers of all academic and methodological backgrounds that dealing with sustainability always needs inter- and transdisciplinarity, which is briefly defined in the following:

**Interdisciplinarity** means that multiple academic disciplines are combined to explore a certain phenomenon or are involved in a specific research activity (project). Knowledge, concepts and theories from several fields (economics, psychology, sociology etc.) are combined and schools of thought are overcome.

**Transdisciplinarity** means research strategies that do not only cross various disciplines but also focus on problems articulated from the practice, or, vice versa, aim for having an impact on a specific field of practice or research. Transdisiplinary approaches enable input across

scientific and non-scientific stakeholder communities and focus on the implementation of research actions based on capacity building to do so, which is also part of the approach

However, similarly to CSR research, sustainable studies only rarely include interactions on an individual level and communication – neither communication processes nor related structures, like the media. Even if sustainability studies try to explore and find ways to improve the social capacity to guide human-nature interactions and relationships toward a more sustainable future, the (key) role of communication in social change and learning processes has not been discussed so far – at least not enough.

Communication on an interpersonal, group intergroup, organizational and mass communication, media level needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, in the next chapter, we will elaborate on basic principles of and perspectives on communication before we then bring sustainability, CSR and communication together in part 3.

# II. PARADIGMS OF COMMUNICATION

After the introduction into Sustainability as issue field, research area and field of practice and just before we talk further about the potential of *communicating of, about CSR* and *for sustainability* in part III, this chapter is about how (much) sustainable development as narrative of the future challenges existing approaches to communication.

We will clarify the basic paradigms to look at our society and the role of communication from a social science perspective, and we will try to get to a definition of 'communication' and, particularly, 'strategic communication'.

## The lady...

Are you a communication professional, I asked the lady with the flower-dress and the big smile on her face? Well, she replied, aren't we all communication experts? We communicate intentionally to convince our kids to make good choices and we create our own narratives that help us to harmonize dissonances that occur as soon as we book flights or buy an avocado. True that, I said. But then communication sees to go deeper than just a sender sending a message to a receiver. True that, the lady answered. It depends on your basic idea and understanding of communication, the paradigm behind it.

Communication in its origin means to share, and thus, the act of sharing meanings from one person, group or entity to another through the use of mutually understood symbols, associations or social representations, wrapped in semiotic rules and signs. The transfer of information and/or a certain message sits at the core of most of the definitions of communication. Processes labelled as encoding and decoding as well as interpretation and related *sense- and meaning-making processes* go beyond this core definition. They are included in a wider and rather critical understanding of communication.

Thus, before we start to better understand the two paradigms, we have to remind ourselves of the core idea of the book: that communication plays a key role in building an understanding of sustainability as principle of restoration and transformation and that at the same time sustainability is used (and sometimes abused) as meta-narrative by corporations or political institutions. But only with the understanding of the two paradigms of communication, the four dimensions of Sustainability Communication – *about, of* and

*for* and last but not least: *sustainable communication* – can be developed and theoretically substantiated and supported.

Thus, this chapter:

- offers you a **quick introduction to the main paradigms of communication** (pragmatism/functionalism and social constructivism/critical perspectives) (II.1.),
- tells you about how one of the paradigms (functionalism/**pragmatism) dominates strategic** and therefore corporate **communication** – and about how corporate communication stimulates public awareness regarding organizational responsibility and sustainability (II.2.).
- This chapter also offers some insights into the status quo of research in the areas of CSR Communication (II.3.) and Sustainability Communication (II.4.).

# II.1. COMMUNICATION OR COMMUNICATING - PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION

Franzisca Weder

## The lady...

"What about us here – what is that?" I asked the lady. We're still here, in the middle of the road, on a hot day in the bright sunshine. Looking at each other. Talking. Asking questions, answering questions and asking new question again. Thinking and reflecting, considering and questioning. "This is what we can also call **communication**. But not communication in a way that I desperately want to tell you something. Or want to inform you, or educate you. This is different; this is an exchange process, or even better: a sense making process; together we create our understanding of the world – and sustainability, sustainable behavior, sustainable development in particular!"

I was thrilled – I never thought about conversations as being so ... constructive, or deliberative. That they make sense – so actually help me to understand the world. Even better: with every thought, with small talk, with every interaction with other people I slightly change my understanding and my vision of this world and my own self in this world.

Sustainability as a paradigm, principle or moral compass for individual as well as organisational practices as well as narrative of the future combating the more established Climate-Change narrative, used (and sometimes abused) in mainly corporate discourses, is influenced by these meta-processes and related technological innovations – often by social media and new information technologies. Thus, communication *about*, *of* and *for sustainability* is influenced by these changes.

Consequently, today:

- there are many levels on which we communicate (individual/micro, organisational/meso, media/ macro (see fig. below)

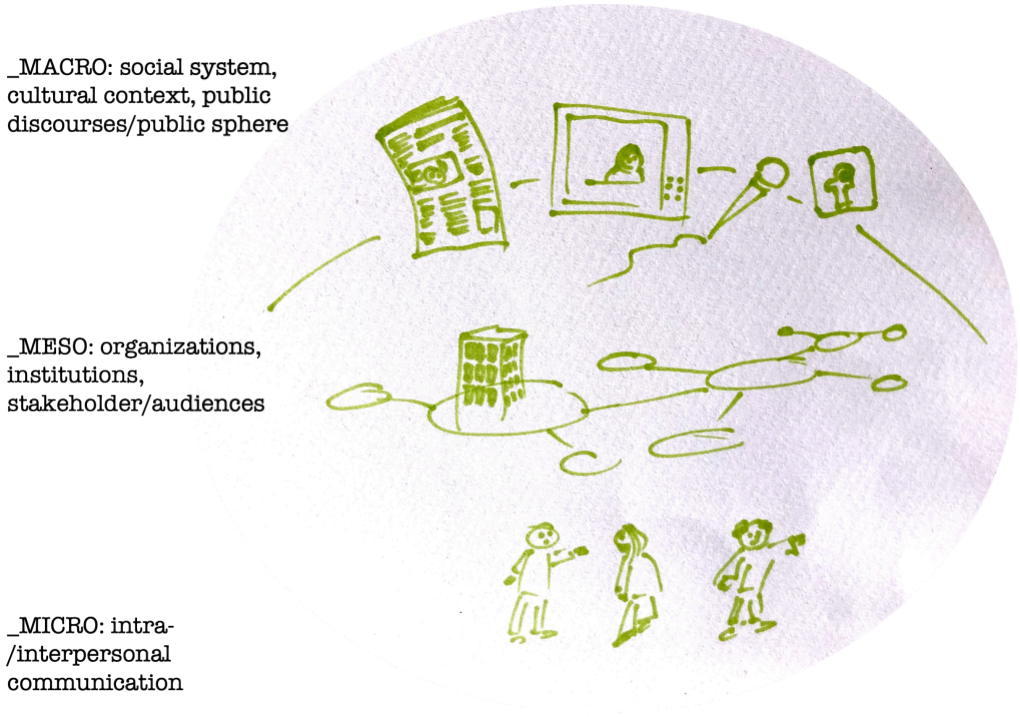



Figure: "MACRO, MESO, MICRO" by Franzisca Weder

- there are multiple, partly converging arenas in which we communicate (i.e. the converging political and economic discourse),
- there are various kinds of people communicating with all kinds of world views (hegemonic voices from politics on the one hand, and rather invisible NGO actors on the other hand).

But the purpose of this book is not only to study this debate, but also to contribute to it.

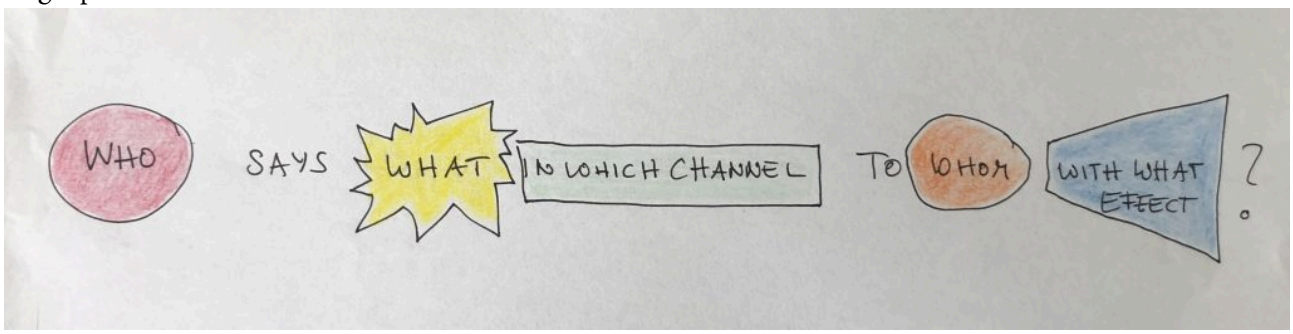
Sustainability studies – even without thinking about communication of, about or for sustainability here – has been characterized as having an interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary character (see chapter I.4). It somehow automatically opens up questions of who communicates what in which channel to whom and with what effect and impact around sustainability and the responsibility of organizations in sustainable development. Communication in related to CSR and sustainability is thus mostly approached from a rather **pragmatic** perspective.

## A pragmatic perspective on communication...

The pragmatic understanding of communication correlates with a positivist worldview; its origin

lies in the age of mass communication – however, since alternatives to mass distribution (and alternatives to related concepts like propaganda, mass political campaigning etc.) first emerged in the 1960s (Enzensberger, 1970), new concepts have evolved, superseding the one-directional flow of communication with certain functions and effects, interpreted as transmission process, which is manifested in the models of Shannon and Weaver (1949) with the "formula" of who (sender/communicator), says what (content) to whom (receiver/audience) in which channel (media) with what effect (see Introduction) (see this chapter).

The concept of communication behind that is that a sender or source of information selects a topic or idea or even makes an issue out of an event or object; it is then created as content containing a certain message, which is encoded or translated into a certain form of written words, visual or audio or even dramatization. After being sent through a channel which shapes how the message is presented, the receiver or public or audience gets the message, decodes and further interprets it based on and influenced by their own experience and context-related values and sets of norms. Increase of knowledge, awareness and even a certain change of behaviour or opinion change as result is possible – and often aimed, at least for from a strategic point of view:




Graphic: 'Formula of communication as transmission process' by Franzisca Weder.

However, while most of CSR, sustainability and strategic communication research in general uses this rather linear concept of communication as a (transmission) process, and thus a rather **pragmatic**, which means functional and instrumental understanding of communication, there is a *different perspective* on communication that we need to understand. This goes back to the paradigm of social-constructivism and offers us a rather **critical**, constructivist perspective on communication. From this perspective, everything that we do as human being is somehow communication, or in other words, we cannot not communicate. From this perspective, communication is an ongoing sense and meaning making process of the world. Therefore, there is not 'one reality' that can be described; instead, reality or what we perceive as such is created in interactions and through conversations between individuals or within groups.

We will now play around with these different perspectives, play around with different communicator roles, observe communication processes from both; a rather pragmatic on the one hand and a rather constructivist, ritual perspective on the other hand. So, let's get more "hands on":

For a better understanding and a 'clearer view' on the two paradigms that we use to understand communication structures and processes in our society, please copy the doodle(d)-glasses onto a piece of scrap paper; or draw two pair of glasses and colour them blue and red and cut them out!





Images by Franzisca Weder

**We will use the two pairs of glasses to look at certain examples of CSR and sustainability communication from both a pragmatic (structural, functional) and a critical (constitutive, social constructivist) perspective, as they will appear in this book from time to time.**

Before we actually start with the examples and the application, we need to understand why we use 'glasses' to give you a more tangible idea of what paradigms are. A paradigm like the two main paradigms in sociology (pragmatic, functionalist or institutional on the one hand and critical, social constructivist on the other hand) goes beyond the idea of "grand theories". A paradigm is a certain lens and thus basic understanding used to approach and look at a certain problem, or in Thomas Kuhn's words, a set of "model problems and solutions for a community of researchers" (Kuhn, 1970/1962, p. viii). In other words: a paradigm is a set of puzzles and a coherent or at least corresponding set of agreed upon methodologies for trying to solve these puzzles.

Again, on the one hand, there is the pragmatic, functional understanding of communication, that describes communication as transmission process of a certain message from one system to another. The focus here is on *communication structures*. The other paradigm is to focus on action and communication *processes* that "keep these structures alive", that produce and reproduce them. Thus, as already described

above, the two possibilities to approach and interpret communication are the pragmatic, functionalist perspective and a constitutive, social constructive perspective:

## Paradigms

- **Pragmatic** (information, education, instrumental sense of communication, functionalist/structural perspective, desription of reality)
- **Constitutive** (symbolic action, social constructivism, sense making,define sth as problem, creates attention, evokes values, orientation,activates/stimulates engagement, exploration)

The more structure-oriented perspective on the one hand, follows a social sciences paradigm that ranges from systems theory, (neo)institutionalism or cognitive approaches at the intersection to psychology and linguistics. The rather process-related and action-oriented perspective on the other hand, following a humanistic paradigm of explorative, critical and problematizing approach to reality.

Watch What is communication? (YouTube, 5m30s) to deepen your knowledge on the paradigms of **communication:**



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=177#oembed-1*

In the next chapter, we will explore how these paradigms play out in existing concepts of strategic communication, followed by the applications in CSR and sustainability communication.

# II.2. PARADIGMS IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Franzisca Weder

After some clarifications around the two paradigms of communication, we want to focus on organizations and their stakeholders and how (much) they are communicatively 'linked'. So before we look at the paradigms and how they influenced existing definitions and conceptualizations of *strategic communication*, we need a basic understanding of organizations, stakeholders and audiences.

Watch Organisations and organisational communication (YouTube, 18m36s) for an introduction into the key terminology and definitions.



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=179#oembed-1*

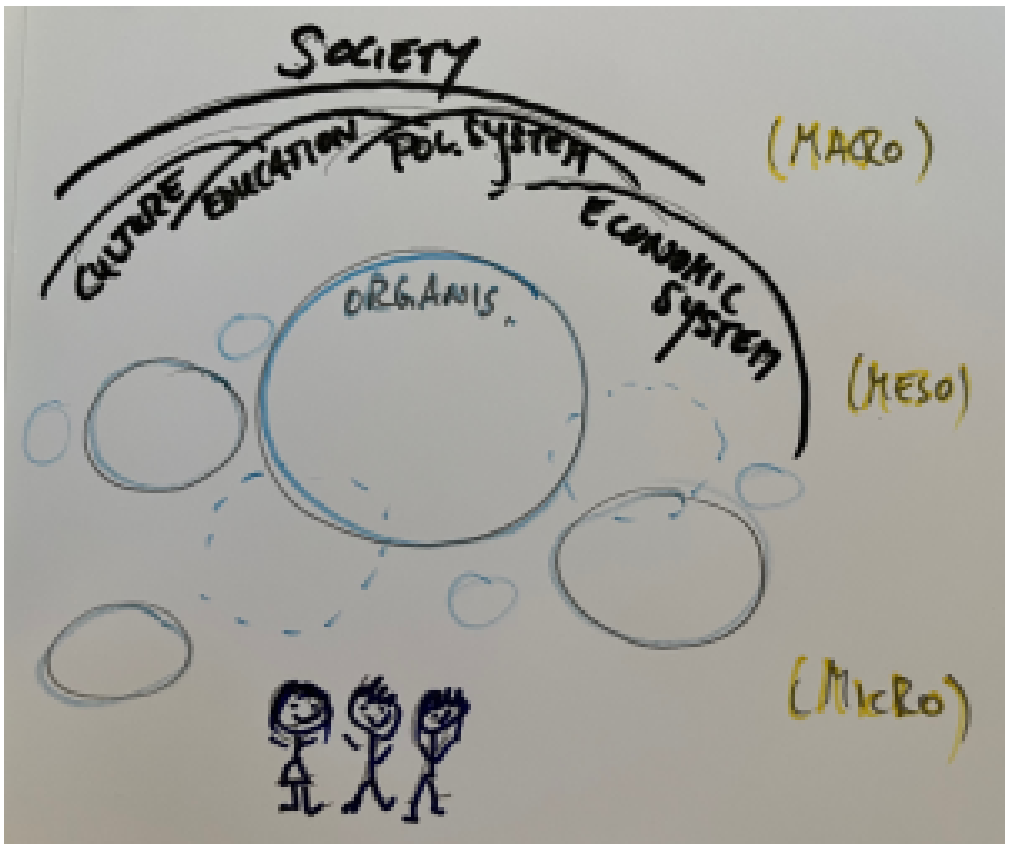
Let's summarize:

- an organization consists of a group of people;
- ... who work together to achieve a common purpose;
- an organization is bigger than the individuals and groups that comprise it, but smaller than the society that gives it its context and environment.



Photo by Alex Kotliarskyi on Unsplash

Organizations can be rather loosely coupled, for example a network, virtual team or association, or hierarchical with a strong vertical organizational and thus management structure, like a big company. Organizations are situated as structural complex between individuals (who are embedded in various organizational structures, like University, sports club, political party etc.) and the society and its subsystems (i.e. the education system, the economic or the political system). See the graphic below:




Graphic: "Organisations" by Franzisca Weder

Organizations interact with other organizations (i.e. their competitors, clients or suppliers), they are not only embedded in the society but closely related to some key groups who have an interest in the organization and its services and products and by the same time are affected by the organizations decision making. They are called 'stakeholders'. The earliest definition of a 'stakeholder' is credited to a memo produced in 1963 by the Stanford Research Institute, defining stakeholder as those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist. A 'stake' means an interest in an organization, for which a justified and normative demand can be made (Reed, 1999); thus the "stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives." (Freeman 1984, p. 46).

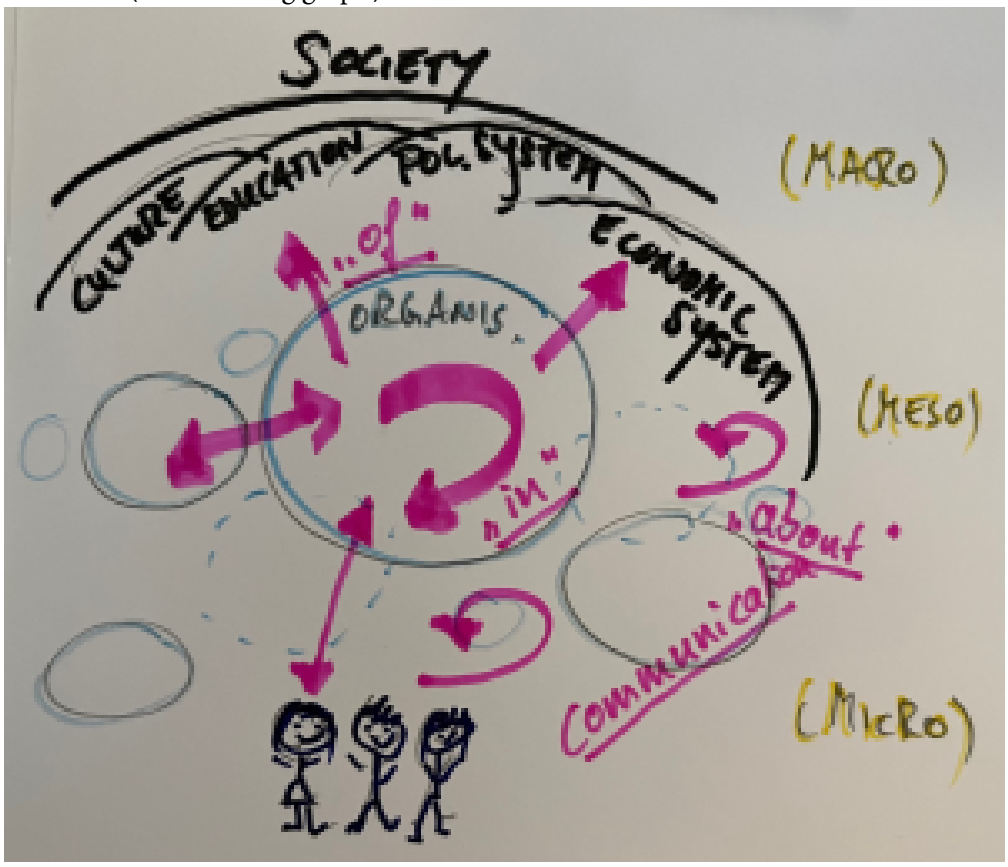
Watch Organisations and stakeholders (YouTube, 30m25s) for a better understanding of organizations and their stakeholder from a strategic communication perspective.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=179#oembed-2*

Since the 1980s, stakeholder theory has developed to explore all groups who potentially affect an organisation, the main reason for that is that if an organisation neglects a stakeholder group, the group has the ability to have a negative impact on the organisation. Stakeholders provide resources, which are important to organizational success e.g. capital, workforce, 'licence to operate', social acceptance. Their well-being is intertwined with the fate of the organization e.g. employment, environmental conditions,

products and they have sufficient influence to impact organizational performance e.g. mobilising of social forces, restraining resources. Because it is impossible that all stakeholders will have the same interests in and demands on the organization, stakeholder management is about managing potentially conflicting interests. This means we need to be strategic and planned when dealing with stakeholders. For a deep dive into stakeholder theory, read About the Stakeholder Theory.

Why is this important for our definition of strategic communication? Because the organization-stakeholder relationship is often stimulated by, facilitated and operationalized through communication. As mentioned in the previous chapter, communication happens on an individual level, but also on an organizational level, which includes interpersonal communication situations and 'organisational' communication as much as planned internal and external communication endeavors to inform and engage stakeholders (see following graph).




Graphic: Interpersonal and organisation organisation by Franzisca Weder

In the literature that describes strategic communication – within and beyond organizations – again, the pragmatic, functionalist or 'realistic' perspective is much more established. From the beginning, pragmatism has influenced strategic communication scholarship, increasingly articulated over the past decades. As described in chapter II.1, pragmatism is even seen as central communication-theoretical perspective (Craig, 2007; Russill, 2008), especially in strategic communication, management communication, political and corporate communication. Here, communication is approached with an idea of control and a strong impact focus, media are perceived as carrying and disseminating (key) messages.

*Strategic communication* is the umbrella term that embraces different communication directions, levels and concepts. Therefore, strategic communication is often described as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission (Hallahaan, 2007, p. 3; Holtzhausen & Zerfass,

2015). This goes back to the pragmatic approach to communication and a functionality or instrumental understanding of communication. How much it differs from a rather constructivist lens on planned or 'managed' communication can be seen in the following:

**Strategic communication (structural perspective)**

- the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission(Hallahaan, 2007, p. 3; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015)
- understanding "how a certain set of audience attitudes, behaviors, or perceptions will support those objectives" is what makes communication strategic (Paul, 2011, p. 5).

**Communication management (process related, constitutive perspective)**

- constitutive flows of communication (McPhee & Zaug, 1995, Putnam & Nicotera, 2007; Schoeneborn et al., 2016)
- Questions: narratives, discourses, interaction, interrelatedness, power, negotiation processes

We can see that complementary to the concept of purposeful use of communication by organisations to fulfill their mission and communication as supporting objectives and a certain goal, a constructivist and rather critical paradigm has gained more advocates over the years. Instead of a one-directional perspective on communication and focus on media as communication structure and facilitator for transmitting messages, communication from a 'new paradigmatic' perspective is perceived as process, as 'flowing', as following certain storylines or narratives, and is characterized as interactive, lacking central control or regulation, as being a sense- and meaning making process at the same time. Part of this thinking is that change often happens through communication within and beyond organizations. With this perspective (use your red glasses), communication can change behavior, patterns of behavior, beliefs and culture, can establish new rules and routines – more or less radically. Then, communication is a diversity of phenomena and experiences (McQuail, 2013), beliefs, states of mind, climates of opinion or attitudes, social and revolutionary movements with their own dynamic, as well as various patterns of interaction and social life, of debate, problematization and conversation. All these conversations are impossible to capture within the original, pragmatic mass communication paradigm; they are not originated and directed by a sender from a specific source; they need subjective interpretation. If you're interested in a deep dive into a more constructivist understanding of organizational communication, read The Communicative Constitution of Organization, Organizing, and Organizationality

These critical perspectives have influenced media and communication studies and their subdisciplines; they are even sneaking into research areas that are dominated by and even originate in a pragmatic, instrumental understanding of communication, like organisational communication, Public Relations as

well as related areas of communication management or marketing. Critical or social constructivist approaches do not limit strategic communication to external on the one hand and internal communication on the other hand. They rather focus on communication *for* organisations, encapsulating every conversation within an organisation and between an organisation and its stakeholders. The idea is that a certain meaning or organisational culture and even reputation is co-created and constructed in every conversation, in every quick chat in the staff kitchen.

Let's have a play with your glasses and look at an example of strategic communication:

## Exercise

Visit What sustainability means at Shell and do the following exercise:

Use your cut out blue glasses and look at sustainability reporting of Shell, for example, at their press releases or their webpage. You might discover their vision of sustainability, communicated to their stakeholders (one directional, transmissive). The functionality here is to show that Shell aims for a contribution to the Global Sustainability Goals (see chapter 1).

> "In addition, we may also contribute to the other SDGs, for example through the policies and operating practices we adopt, the partnerships and collaborations we work in and the social investments we make" (Shell, 2020).

From a constructive, sense making perspective, this sentence seems to be a "hollow notion" (Weder et al., 2019). To explore ideas and possible unique narratives constructed and offered to the website visitor, we can find the following under the headline "A fair and just transition":

> "We are working in various countries to explore viable pathways towards a prosperous, low-carbon future tailored to individual country context" (Shell, 2020).

Here, Shell follows the meta-narrative of sustainable development being a process of *transition.* However, this can be rather labelled as aspirational talk (Christiensen et al., 2017), there is no further disclosure of their own interpretation and negation processes about the meaning. The strategy and the tactics that are applied for this "exploration".

Before we further explore existing CSR and sustainability communication in part III with our glasses, we need to dig deeper and gain a better understanding of the two paradigms sketched out and their applications in CSR and sustainability communication so far.

# II.3. CSR AND COMMUNICATION

Franzisca Weder

Let's get back to the idea of communication being the core of all processes in the society. Communication was described in the first chapter of this second part of the book as the sending and giving as well as receiving of information and messages – or the exchange of ideas, meaning, information. But we learned that communication also enables individuals, groups, communities, organizations and societal systems to create meaning and sense, to narrate and socially construct the world around them.

In the second chapter of this second part of the book, we also learned about strategic communication and the general research paradigms. We also briefly explained that strategic communication research mostly looks at:

- the sender of information, so who is communicating (individuals, organizations, institutions, corporations, etc.), and at
- the receiver of the information (again, another individual, a group, a "target audience" or a certain segment of the public – or 'stakeholder').



Photo by SHVETS production on pexels.com

However, we also explored that organization, every corporation as well as every political institution or environmental movement is embedded in the society *via communication*. Thus, organizations communicate with their employees or members (internal communication), organizations communicate with their stakeholder or target audiences (via public relations, advertisement or media reporting) and organizations participate in societal discourses, in offering information about climate change related

problems and their answer (i.e. their CSR or sustainability strategy) on their website (for example, the European Energy Corporation: OMV) or in various form of so called CSR or sustainability communication, which will be explored in part III of this book. For now, we will have a look into CSR communication research and answer the question of what phenomena researchers looked at so far.

Over the past decades, not only the Top 500, the big corporations like Coca Cola or Nestlé realized that they are responsible for not only doing good, but communicating about it. Even small business, like a local bakery in Australia (check Baker's Delight CSR endeavors) started to understand, that responsibility needs to be communicated – and by the same time, that communication needs to be responsible, and sustainable; it's not a short term marketing-gag, it is about a meaning making process, about the creation of a narrative that goes beyond a short-term throw-out of a "green-image" (we will talk about greenwashing later, see chapter III.1 and chapter III.2).

Looking at the research area that studies and analyses responsibilities that are allocated and taken via communication and therefore various forms of CSR communication, we see that most of the literature analyses predominantly communication *of* CSR, related activities or concepts like sustainable development or ESG and how they are presented and represented in 'classic' forms of strategic communication (reports, websites etc.). This stands for a functional, pragmatic and therefore instrumental perspective on communication, where CSR is perceived as one way to reach economic goals. Check this overview:

## Theoretical approaches to CSR Communication

- Instrumental approaches (CSR = a mere means to the end of profits) (Friedman 1970; Porter & Kramer 2002; 2006)
- Integrative approaches (CSR = integration of social demands) (Sethi1975; Preston & Post, 1975; Mitchell et al., 1997; Carroll, 1979)
- Ethical approaches (CSR = ethical values/obligation) (Freeman, 1984; Brundtland Report 1987)
- Political approaches (CSR = social duties/rights & participation in a certain social cooperation) (Davis 1960; Donaldson & Dunfee 1994; Andriof & McIntosh 2001; Matten & Crane 2005; Garriga & Melé 2004)

Today, the field of scholarship that CSR represents is a broad and diverse one, encompassing debates from many perspectives, disciplines, and ideological positions. (Crane et al., 2008, p. 7; Diehl et al., 2017; Golob et al., 2013; Elving et al., 2015). But as stated, the functional, instrumental understanding of communication dominates related conceptualizations of responsibility (CSR) and CSR communication

(similar to strategic communication in general) (Bjorn et al., 2018; Kuntsman & Rattle, 2019), which also includes communication *of* and *about* sustainability or ESG (Weder et al., 2019a; Newig et al., 2013; Genc, 2017), evaluated and affirmed by an increasing number of studies focusing mainly on sustainability reporting (Chaudhuri & Jayaram, 2018) or recommended media channels for CSR and sustainability Communication (Huang et al., 2019; Maltseva et al., 2019; Burns, 2015).

However, there are various approaches to CSR and thus to CSR Communication. Integrated approaches to CSR as shown above go hand in hand with integrated approaches to strategic communication, as well political or ethical approaches are in line with a more critical understanding of communication, with a stronger focus on stakeholder engagement and / or participation.

The overview of CSR communication research also shows that there seems to be a specific focus on *communication strategies*. Based on the existing understandings of strategic communication and the paradigms discussed in chapters II.1 and II.2, the literature and concepts of CSR communication can differentiate between the following strategies (based on a classic differentiation by Grunig & Hunt for Public Relations):

1. **Stakeholder Information Strategies:** Inform stakeholders about favourable corporate CSR decisions and actions! (information focus, one-way communication, sense giving, decided by management, stakeholder either support or oppose)
2. **Stakeholder Response Strategies:** Demonstrate to stakeholders how the company integrates their concerns! (two-way communication, but asymmetric, sense making & sense giving; stakeholders respond to corporate actions, evaluated with surveys, opinion polls etc.)
3. **Stakeholder Involvement Strategies:** Invite and establish frequent, systematic and pro-active dialogue with stakeholders, i.e. opinion makers, corporate critics, the media, etc. (two-way, symmetric communication, sense making, co-construction of CSR efforts, stakeholders are involved, participate and suggest corporate action, negotiations / integration with stakeholders)

## What can we take away from here?

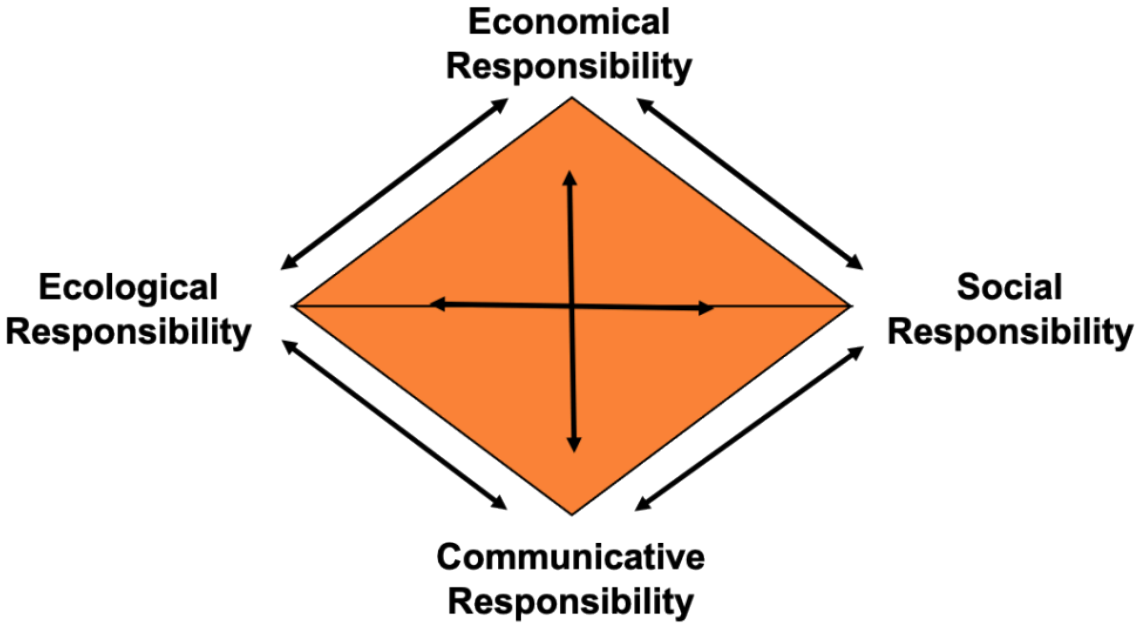
Firstly, again, CSR communication research is influenced by the two paradigms. Secondly, apparently CSR communication is different. Because, it's not *two* variations of communication that is dealt with, it is three!

What does that mean – and what does that mean for our further considerations of strategic communication in the area of CSR and sustainability?

The third strategy that adds to a primarily pragmatic and functional understanding and a rather constructivist or constitutive understanding of mainly organizational communication is a more 'radical'

approach to communication. This includes negotiations, participation and engagement as well as long-term planning and as such, 'sustainable communication' as going beyond the two existing pathways. So apparently, it is not only about *what* is communicated and *to whom* and *in which channel* – but it seems to be even more relevant to think about *how* it is communicated! Accordingly in recent research and theoretical conceptualizations of CSR communication, the *quality of communication* is increasingly debated.

The quality and thus 'communicative responsibility' was firstly captured in the concept of the *quadruple bottom line of CSR* (Karmasin & Weder, 2008):




Graphic by Franzisca Weder

If communication becomes an area of responsibility, organizations are challenged to engage in dialogues with stakeholders in various issue arenas, which puts more attention to the *character of CSR communication,* related standards and normative frameworks. Following the idea of 'communicative responsibility', more recently sustainability was introduced as such a norm or normative framework for stakeholder communication (Golob et al., 2013), stakeholder dialogues and organizational negotiation processes about the dimensions of the allocation and taking of corporate responsibility. Weder et al., 2019, for example state that sustainability as a normative framework for CSR communication offers a broader perspective on environmental and social issues like resources, diversity, workplace security and communicative behavior itself. It definitely leads to an *integrated perspective on CSR communication* processes and structures (i.e. Diehl et al., 2017; Golob et al., 2017). Today, it is obvious that there was a shift from CSR communication research predominantly focusing on information and the instrumental use of communication to present CSR related activities to the stakeholders and specific audiences to impact orientation. With bringing in a more radical perspective on communication and thus a critical approach to CSR communication understood as co-creation and sense-making, as negotiation processes related to a normative framework, CSR communication should no longer be seen solely as the communication about social, economic and environmental responsibility, so of normative frameworks (Morsing, 2017).

Much more, the 'fourth pillar of CSR' is not only discussed in the sense of an obligation or

responsibility to communicate, but rather as a *normative framework for CSR communication in the future*. Only if CSR communication is responsible itself, which means being sustainable, transparent, objective, authentic and trustworthy, it can have an *impact*. CSR communication then encompasses integrated practices to communicate about CSR activities, communicative practices to identify responsibilities (evaluation, stakeholder involvement, responsibility communication), as well as values and normative frameworks to communicate responsibly (safeguard, beware of 'greenwashing', communicative responsibility) (Weder et al., 2019).

CSR communication has an increasing impact on issue life cycles and on the establishment of normative frameworks like sustainability, morality in consumer behavior and decision-making processes as well as internal organizational processes and perceptions and thus organizational culture. This has to be recognized and taken into account in future CSR communication education and training, as well as research and practice.

## We summarize:

Based on the understanding that an organization is communicatively embedded in the society, the organization is not only responsible for their action and behavior in an environmental, economic and social dimension but also for their (strategic) communication. Apparently sustainability seems to be a norm or guiding principle to secure the quality of CSR communication in terms of its impact. In the next chapter, we will further explore the status quo of sustainability communication research and how (much) the paradigms discussed come into play.

# II.4. SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION AS RESEARCH AREA?

Franzisca Weder

Until now, sustainability has increasingly debated from a CSR or CSR-communication lense and in related research. In this final chapter of part II, we will trace back sustainability as core principle for a balanced human-nature relationship, as principle of restoration and care which has – theoretically – the potential to become a new universal value (like democracy or freedom of speech) in environmental communication research.

## The lady...

I had to get back to the lady. Meanwhile, she'd pushed her bike towards a book shop close by. I could see her bike leaning at the brick wall. As I got closer, I could see her colorful dress between the shelves. I approached her and felt terrible. I must be so annoying.

Taking a peek around the shelf, she looked at me, astonished, a smile curled her lips. In her hands she held a book, I could see the word 'sustainability'. And something like 'norm', or 'normal'. I asked her: "What is this book about?". She said, "It is about cultural norms. The things we should be – and what we should do. And how what is 'normal' for us today developed over time." "Can you give me an example?" I asked. "Well, one of our norms is to not harm other people. So if we read about domestic violence for example, we reflect on this behavior and evaluate it based on our norms and values. We will not like it. We will say: this should not happen." We develop our understanding of what is 'norm'-related or 'normal', and thus ethically valuable and desirable in our family, in our community, in our culture – and over time. It is interesting to think about sustainability as one of those norms. If – or if not sustainable development is such a normative concept, with sustainability being one of our 'core values'."

There is a research area that already deals with sustainability as principle – even without always explicitly mentioning it; and it is not CSR communication! A research field that deals with human-nature relationships and it's representations in communication. Let's have a look at *environmental communication* as field that includes sustainability as principle of restoration and care, to then draw some conclusions

around sustainability communication as potentially definable research field within or at least connected to environmental and science communication.

Taking the existence of sections of the professional associations (like ICA or IAMCR) as a criterion for established research areas within media and communications studies, it becomes obvious that sustainability communication is not yet an independent research area, in comparison to media economics, public relations, journalism research, media ethics or science communication or environmental communication, which have a combined interest group in IAMCR, and their own professional associations with PCST or the IECA.

Even if the topics and issues of sustainability attract more and more attention, sustainability as a "master frame" of public communication and common-sense issue (Weder, 2017) is related to existing research and scholarly work rather assigned to other sections (mainly PR and organizational communication, and here mostly part of the so called 'CSR-research' (Rasche et al. 2017, Diehl et al. 2017; Pompper, 2015; Ihlen et al. 201; May et al. 2007).

However, in 2011, the *ICA section for environmental communication* at its initial meeting at the annual world conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) in Boston, formulated the following strategy:

> "The Environmental Communication Interest Group (...) will help communication scholars improve the environmental performance of their universities, the media industries, and environmental organizations. The group will support members to integrate sustainability issues into their teaching and promote research in this area." (ICA, 2018).

The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR, 2018) has a working group entitled "Environment, Science & Risk Communication", specializing "in research on media and public understanding of science and environment issues; science and health-related media panics; science and environmental journalism; media roles in global environmental controversy; the political uses or constructions of nature; and the roles of pressure groups, new media and activism with respect to science and environment issues" (IAMCR, 2020).

Beside these two organizations, the International Environmental Communication Association (IECA), has the strongest transdisciplinary focus, claiming that "environmental communication is communication about environmental affairs" (IECA). While they do not explicitly mention sustainability, they mention a balanced human-nature relationship as core principle that environmental communication research deals with:

> Environmental communication "includes all of the diverse forms of interpersonal, group, public, organizational, and mediated communication that make up the social debate about environmental issues and problems, and our relationship to the rest of nature" (IECA, 2018).

So even though there is the early and clear demand to not forget about the principle of restoration, a balanced human-nature relationship and sustainability in environmental communication research (Peterson, 1997; Lindenfeld et al., 2012; Cox & Depoe, 2015), there seems to be the need to conceptualize the potential of a critical environmental communication perspective on sustainability and sustainable development communication.

Thus, to trace back the emergence of a research field of sustainability communication we need to explore environmental communication research; we need to dig deeper into the literature and reflect on the question of where and how sustainability & communication are linked – and where to find new or alternative perspectives on sustainability as framework and practice in communication, and how sustainability as guiding principle or 'norm' it is realized through communication.

## And here comes some theory...

### Environmental communication and how sustainability communication is emerging as research area

Theory of science locates environmental communication at the intersection between science communication and environmental and sustainability studies (Michelsen, 2007, S. 25; Burgess et al., 1998; Agyeman, 2007; Killingsworth, 2007; Brulle, 2010; Tinnell, 2011). Lindenfeld et al. (2012) even say that environmental communication scholarship is critical to the success of sustainability science (p. 23). After Godemann & Michelsen (2011, 2013), just recently, Weder et al. (2021) define sustainability communication as inter- and transdisciplinary research area that can be demarcated not without acknowledging the connections, collaborations and conversations with environmental, climate and science communication. To offer an innovative perspective on sustainability from a particularly critical environmental communication perspective with the goal to overcome the dominance of the connotation of sustainability as economic principle, we have to better understand environmental communication as a

field within the communication discipline, as well as a metafield that cuts across disciplines (Milstein, 2009, 344).

At the core of environmental communication as a discipline, there is the assumption that how we communicate affects our perspective on nature and the living world; and "these perceptions help shape how we define our relationship with and within nature and how we act toward nature" (Milstein, 2009, 345). The abovementioned thought shows that most of environmental communication researchers use existing theory to investigate their questions about human-nature relations. Three approaches to understand those relations are used: First, discourse theory, informed by poststructuralism, science studies and cultural studies, analysing how nature is represented in our communication (symbolic & material). Second, mediated environmental communication research, interested in narratives in the media, interpretations of the nature, strategic communication for the environment and engagement. However, as mentioned above, environmental communication's ethical duty (Cox, 2007) lays not only in enhancing the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals which are relevant to the well-being of both natural systems and humanity. Much more, environmental communication centers critical research, constructivist approaches and therefore problematization as core to sustainable development as transformation and sustainability as principle of restoration (Weder & Milstein, forthcoming). This third approach encompasses problematization on an individual level as stimulation for (here: eco-)identity building processes (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020) as well as problematization in the public. Thus, as Lindenfeld et al. already lined out in 2012, environmental communication research and scholarship offers ways to overcome a linear, one-way transmission model of communication toward critical, re-constructivist, and engaged approaches (2012, p. 23). In other words, next to the two classic perspectives or theoretical lenses (objective vs. interpretive), mainly applied and activist theories see environmental communication research as siding in social-environmental change and transformation, including the ethical and transformative role of academics and scholars.

The character of environmental communication research as "crisis discipline" (Peterson et al., 2007), and therefore the strong link to science communication and the ethical duty of participatory research (Cox, 2007) can be pointed out here as well. Davis et al. (2018) also mentioned that environmental communication emerged in part as critique of science or, at least, of the science-technology-industry nexus, whereas science communication originally emerged by doing surveys of public scientific literacy and strategies of popularization intended to raise literacy levels (p. 432), again following a stronger linear idea of communication.

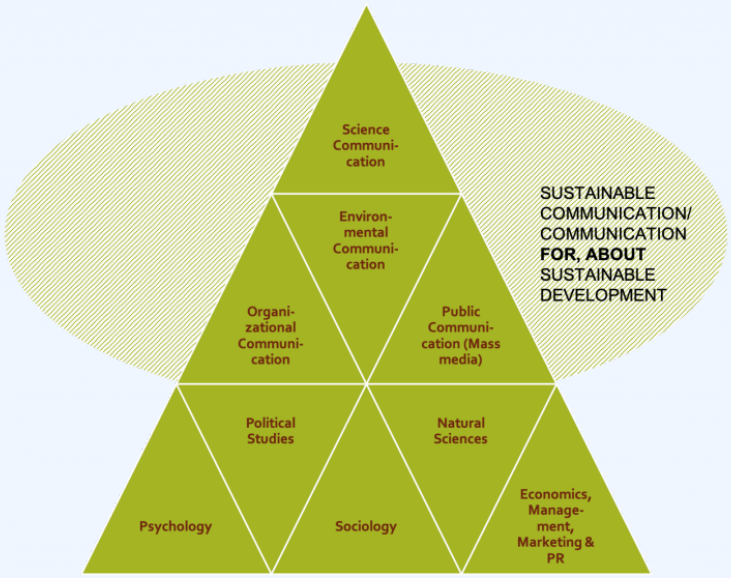
Environmental communication acquires attributes of a distinct field of not only academic but as well intellectual effort, and focuses on social and environmental impact of the discipline itself (Cox, 2013, Cox & Depoe, 2015). Environmental communication research therefore is different – and therefore the breeding ground for a critical conceptualization of sustainability communication. Thus, in the following section of the paper, we discuss this breeding ground further by mainly pointing out the need for alternatives to traditional, objective information-transmission models (Davis et al., 2018, 432; Trench & Bucchi, 2010). As well, it will be shown where new theories in environmental communication research are needed, realizing critically engaged and reflected scholarship with an impact on social and environmental change, with playing a role for sustainable development, for transformation.

## Interdisciplinary environmental communication and sustainability communication as transdisciplinary research field

As mentioned in the introduction, various disciplines deal with issues like environmental discourses in the media and specific issues like climate change, renewable energy or fracking (Schmidt et al., 2013; Neverla & Schäfer, 2012; Hou & Reber, 2011; Voisey & Church, 1999; Suhunen, 1993). Environmental communication is a well-established research area (Pezzullo & Cox, 2017; Hansen & Cox, 2015; Lester, 2010), dated back to the publication of a generic rhetorical study and announcement (Oravec, 1984) and followed by a wide range of environmental communication studies, including every type of communication, delivered by individuals, organizations, institutions or the media. Still today, the special character of environmental communication research is the centrality of critical approaches, and thus, its character to be an activist discipline itself. From the beginning, environmental communication research goes beyond the information or transfer of knowledge approach. The potential to shape environmental and societal development, to transform and change, is a constitutional element of environmental communication. Therefore, the field is described as ecological discourse as well (Brulle, 2010; Weder & Milstein, forthcoming), with the sustainability concept being the most recent communicative framework applied and put attention to. This is supported by Davis et al. (2018), saying that communicating sustainability and related problems at the

intersection of society, ecology and the economy is the main challenge for both science communication and environmental communication. Sustainability challenges science communication and the three models of diffusion, dialogue, and participation (Suldovsky et al., 2017, 588), and sustainability challenges environmental communication at its social constructivist core with a particular concern for knowledge co-production (McGreavy & Hart, 2017).

"Sustainability communication" itself can be seen as a fairly young and interdisciplinary research area that stands at the beginning, even if it already appears as term in relevant journals like "Environmental Communication" (Burgess et al., 1998; Agyeman, 2007; Killingsworth, 2007; Plec, 2007; Brulle, 2010; Monani, 2011). However, the plurality of disciplines working on the topic of sustainability at the intersection of environmental, science and organizational communication (see Fig. 1) can be seen watching the authors of the "Handbook Sustainability Communication", who come from natural sciences, technical sciences, arts, humanities or social sciences (Michelsen & Godemann, 2007, 927 f.); as well, the recently published Reader on "Sustainability Communication" (Weder et al., 2021) shows the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of sustainability communication.




Graphic: "Demarcation of the research areas environmental and sustainability communication" by Franzisca Weder

In this book, we disagree with Davis et al. (2018), saying that communicating about sustainability is treated as a sub-field of environmental communication research. However, we do not go as far as Michelsen (2007) in saying that sustainability communication substitutes environmental communication. Rather we say that the communication *about*, *of* and *for* sustainability complements current environmental

communication research and stimulates the field at its transdisciplinary, critical core. In other words: environmental communication research is due to its critical core and obligation to and passion for transformation and a new understanding of sustainability as restoration, as process of problematization, disruption and change, and therefore of sustainable development as transformation, going beyond the common sense belief of sustainability being an economic principle. This is conceptualized and discussed in the following section looking at the dimensions of and perspectives on communication, communicators, media, messages, public and audiences and possible communication effects.

Watch Sustainability part 1 (YouTube, 28m34s) on sustainability communication as an emerging interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of research for a better understanding.



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=183#oembed-1*

## To summarize:

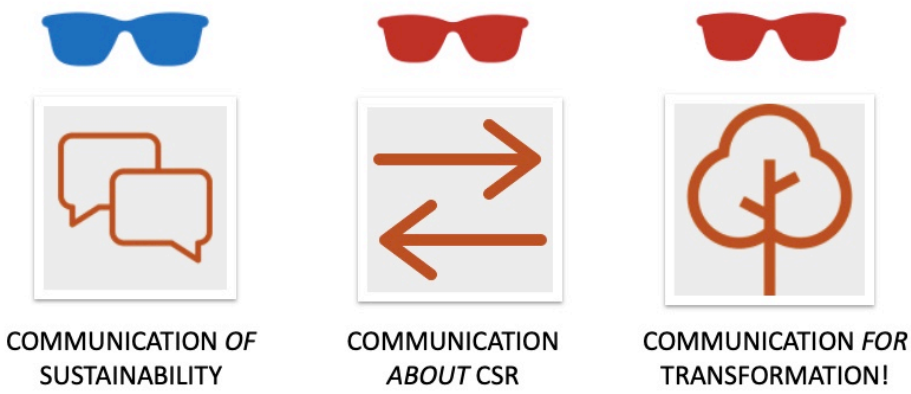
Similar to CSR communication, most of the literature that links sustainability and communication follows a rather functionalist, instrumental or at least structural perspective, seeking to understand how to communicate about sustainability mostly from an organisational or institutional perspective. This can be further explained by noting that the complexity of an issue like sustainable development is reduced step by step and by linking the "new knowledge" to an already existing groundwork of knowledge and practices.

There are only a few attempts to approach sustainability from a critical perspective. In environmental communication research as well in related disciplinary areas like science or climate change communication, a stronger conversational perspective is increasingly debated. Based on these attempts, we will explore communication of CSR, communication about CSR and communication for sustainability as well as sustainable communication in the third part of this book.

# III. COMMUNICATION OF, ABOUT AND FOR CSR & SUSTAINABILITY

This chapter will introduce the dimensions of CSR communication, guided by the principle of sustainability.

The dimensions are the following:




Graphic: "Dimensions of CSR communication" by Franzisca Weder

We will work along those dimensions in the subchapters and learn about the paradigmatic background, function, and also potential and challenges of CSR and sustainability communication.

# III.1. CSR AND SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

Franzisca Weder

## The lady...

Leaving the bookshop, I stumbled over a newspaper that someone has dropped on the pathway. The headline was horrible:

**"Global carbon dioxide emissions hit new highs"**

I know, it's happening. But it gives me shivers if I think about it. The changing climate, global hazards.

Today, climate change, environmental and 'green' or sustainability issues seem to be everywhere; the most prevalent ones are renewable vs. fossil energy sources, waste and pollution. Furthermore, the public is interested in water supply and the risk of scarcity or floods, food and land management, ecosystems and endangered species or bushfires, as well as public health issues – not to talk about a pandemic and possible effects on/or possibly being affected by the current human-nature-(non)relationship.

Organizations are at the focus of this book – and how (much) they communicate *for* sustainability to take responsibility in this multiple crisis scenario (see Introduction and part I). We have learned from looking at existing CSR communication research that corporations have made a massive effort to take responsibility in an environmental, social and economic dimension, to take on the responsibility that is allocated to them by the public or their stakeholders. Over the past decade, corporations have conceptualized themselves as "citizens" (Carroll, 1998), tried to maximize their business returns by taking 'corporate social responsibility' (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010). Consequently, they developed CSR concepts, strategies and performance to communicate about it (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012).

Today, CSR has become an undisputed – yet contested – concept of corporate conduct in a globalized business world (Rasche et al., 2017). Consequently, still the European Commission's outline counts, stating that CSR is not a voluntary engagement anymore but a "corporate behavior which integrates social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations"

(European Commission, 2011, p. 6). From there, obligations and legal requirements to communicate and report about activities with which an organisation contributes to sustainable development (e.g. European Council, 2014; Gulenko, 2018) have increased which goes hand in hand with the institutionalization of frameworks to measure related activities (i.e. GRI)

However, CSR endeavors are sometimes driven by intrinsic ethical motives or the perception that sustainable development is a deeper process of ethical reflection within organizations and thus part of their culture, but much more often it is stimulated by the expectation of possible business returns that companies may reap from CSR initiatives, namely building trust and reputation, customer loyalty, brand equity as well as generating positive effects in employee recruitment. Organisations expect that "doing good" and the communication *of* the CSR activities will also lead to "doing better" through positive reactions of key stakeholder groups like consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). Bringing in a communication perspective means impact orientation but by the same time includes the awareness that the communication needs to be ethical as well:

> From a communication perspective, the principle of sustainability can guide the business case – it is not a business case itself. The principle of sustainability can guide CSR communication. Then, sustainability works as guiding principle to secure that CSR communication is impactful (see previous chapter).

So, after an era of institutionalization of mainly external CSR communication (1990-2020) we have reached a tipping point where current forms of CSR communication and practices are increasingly challenged, and we can see a reorientation of CSR communication from information to *impact orientation* and from communication *about* CSR (informational approach) to *communicative responsibility* (impact-oriented approach) following sustainability as a new normative framework – also for all forms of strategic and corporate communication (Weder et al., 2019), which will be further discussed in this third part of the book.

## The lady...

The lady joined me on the pathway, staring at the newspaper and the frightening headline. She put her sunglasses on; suddenly she looked different, more distant. Apparently, she was still

looking at me, because she asked me if I do understand what is meant by taking different perspectives on communication. Of course, I knew … however; what does it change, if we understand communication as mean to an end, as channel to be used to get connected with a certain group of people or if we think of communication as interaction, as core process of our society, as process of negotiation?

I kept on pondering: every conversation – like the one, I'm having with this lady – creates meaning, creates frames and a specific picture of the world. Not only big headlines like the one in the newspaper. Not only shared media articles on twitter.

"There is a difference", she said, "between a birds-eye perspective, looking at the media and public issues, an organization's perspective and an individual perspective." Well, that might be true. But what is the difference? Why do we need those different lenses or 'glasses' to look at organizations for example and their communicative behavior?

Now, in part III, we will argue why it does make a difference; why it is important to think in both directions, a pragmatic and instrumental way of using communication to fulfill a certain purpose, and a constructive or even constitutive way of creating meaning, understanding, common sense and potentially new norms. Thus, we will differentiate between organizations communicating their CSR-related activities and related reporting (communication *of* CSR, chapter III.2), and communication *about* responsibility (chapter III.3). From there, we will open up the discussion bringing in existing knowledge from sustainability communication research, talking about communication *for* sustainability and in a sustainable manner on all levels (chapter III.4).

Therefore, we will firstly pull out our sunglasses again to look at different dimensions of CSR and sustainability communication:

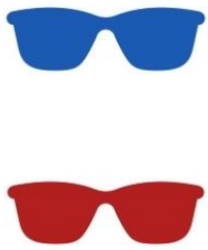


Image: "Two perspectives on communication" by Franzisca Weder

To do that, we need to recap a couple of aspects that we explored in the previous chapters:

## We remember...

The "levels" of communication are labelled as:

- the macro level (systems, the public sphere, the media, mediated communication),
- the meso level (communication from organisations, institutions, PR, marketing, reporting etc.) and
- the micro level (individuals, subjective perceptions of the world, inter- and intrapersonal communication).

With this in mind and the glasses at hand, we can firstly describe CSR communication as:

- "process of anticipation stakeholder's expectations, articulation of CSR policy and managing different ... tools designed to provide true and transparent information about a company`s or a brand`s integration of its business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders" (Podnar, 2008: 85)
- integrative perspective on CSR communication: "harmonization of all CSR-related communication strategies and activities" (Diehl et al., 2017) or
- information, response, and involvement as "guides" for communication management (Morsing, 2017; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

However, as mentioned a couple of times now, we want go beyond this pragmatic understanding, and include culture oriented forms of communication, deliberation processes, and a broader perspective on negotiation processes within organizations, between organizations and their stakeholder and public discourses on/about sustainability, because the transformation of norms (sustainable development) needs public expression and ways in which contemporary public discourse reflects and represents, as well as social relations.

If sustainability itself becomes a norm that guides CSR communication, sustainability plays a role on all levels – or in other words, the principle of sustainability sneaks in on all levels, and CSR communication needs to be defined in a different way:

CSR communication with sustainability as guiding principle for communication:

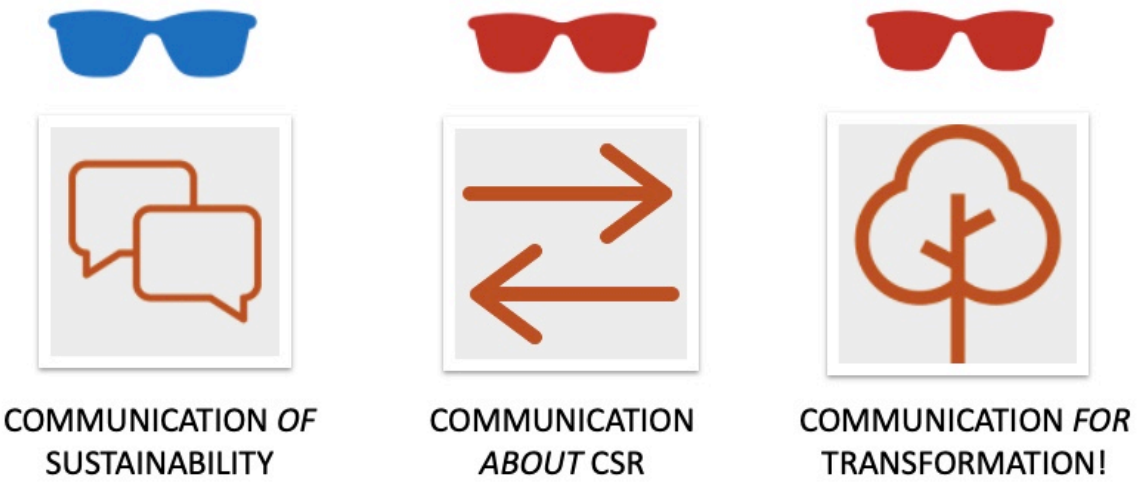
- in the public and in the media, where there is an increasing number of media reporting on sustainability or negotiation sustainability as principle of action,

- on a level of individual decision-making where sustainability increasingly works as moral compass for behavior and in decision making,
- but mainly for corporations, NGOs and political institutions, which are 'forced' to communicate their sustainability related actions and project and increasingly negotiate sustainability related issues within organizational structures.

Thus, for us, **CSR communication includes communication *of*, *about* and *for* sustainability** on three levels: firstly, on a rather systemic, societal level, secondly, on an organisational level; and thirdly, on an individual and even intra-personal level.

Communication is the principle of societal organisation (Ziemann, 2007), then, sustainability communication is a sense-making process dealing with the future development of society and is influenced and guided by sustainability as normative framework and moral compass – for organisational as well as individual behaviour.

We will structure the chapters in this part III along the following three-fold:




Graphic: "Dimensions of Sustainability Communication" by Franzisca Weder

Outlook: Chapter III.2 will explore communication of CSR and sustainability, chapter III.3, will look at public discourses, the media and this communication about CSR and chapter III.4 develops innovative perspectives on communication for transformation and sustainability – again with a micro, meso and macro perspective on current phenomena and existing concepts.

# III.2. COMMUNICATION OF CSR

Franzisca Weder

## The lady...

I went on, I had so much to think about. I actually have had the nerves to give that lady my phone number. She went off, and I was left, puzzled, worried. And hungry. The book shop had a coffee place attached to it so I turned around and asked for a cappuccino – with almond milk, please. Did I bring my keep cup? No, of course not. My keep cups are lining up nicely in a cupboard in my kitchen. I grabbed a coke from the fridge next to the counter – but what was that? 70% of our plastic bottle production use recycled plastic, the bottle told me. Or was this Coca Cola as a company, one of the major polluters of our planet, speaking to me? ... After the conversations with the lady, I felt I should give this a second thought. What is the company telling me here? Why do they tell me that they care for recycling? What do they want me to think and do?

In the previous chapters, CSR communication was identified as "process of anticipation stakeholder's expectations, articulation of CSR policy and managing different tools designed to provide true and transparent information about a company's or a brand's integration of its business operations, social and environmental concerns, and interactions with stakeholders" (Podnar, 2008).

This includes marketing communication and public relations, promoting a certain product with communication focused on the transmission of information. As such, Coca Cola informs their customers in a one-directional manner – in my case about their bottles being made out of recycled plastic, at least to a certain percentage. This is one example of communication *of* a certain aspect of sustainability related to the big problem of plastic waste, pollution of the oceans and challenges around recycling. Furthermore, Coca Cola communicate that they "act in ways to create a more sustainable and better shared future. To make a difference in people's lives, communities and our planet by doing business the right way" (Coca Cola, 2023). Product information, advertising and marketing as much as website information and reporting are part of communication *of* sustainability, as defined in the scheme below.

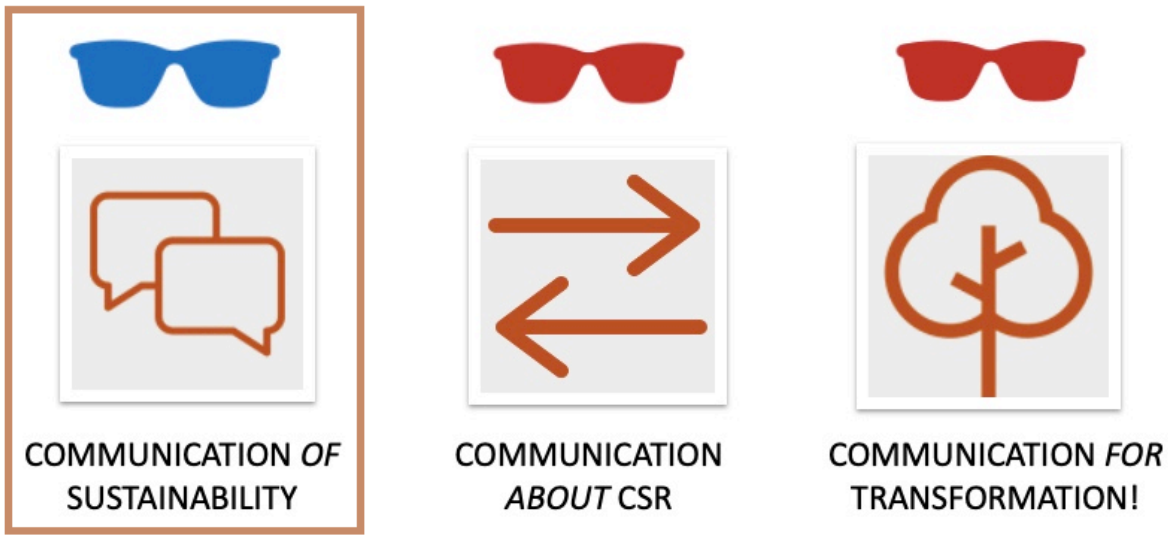



Image: "Dimensions of Sustainability Communication" by Franzisca Weder

In brief, communication *of* CSR related activities and an organization's understanding of sustainability and sustainable development is characterized by the following mode of communication and function:

### Communication of CSR / sustainability

*Direction / mode of communication:*

One-directional, transmissive, sender-receiver, one to many

*Function:*

Transmission, information and knowledge transfer towards an objective

Communication *of* CSR and sustainability is therefore sender and communicator oriented. Academic research is studying corporations, political institutions but also civil society organizations and Nonprofits and asks for their vision, goals and key messages, how they communicate and what the channels are that are used (social media against traditional media, reporting, see below, etc.). Communication professionals and consultants develop strategies and best practice frameworks for the communication of CSR activities, projects and corporate goals.

## CSR campaigning and communication *of* CSR

The most established understanding of communication is that information can be transmitted and disseminated towards a specific target audience or more general: a 'receiver' of the information.

Communication fulfills a certain purpose, it is used and thus a tool to achieve the communicator's objectives and thus can be monitored in terms of its effects (for example: reputation gain).

Communication of CSR happens mostly in form of a so called 'campaign', which is a connected series of operations designed to bring about a particular result. A campaign includes communication processes on an interpersonal, group, and organizational level but focuses mostly on media and public relations. Internal and external communication processes are integrated (If you want to learn more about campaigning, watch the recorded lecture, Campaigning (YouTube, 17m5s)). Campaigns can be differentiated in regard to their timeframe and scope, so they are either focused on a short-term, mid-term or long-term goal and either conceptualized as information, awareness or behavior change campaign.

These specific communication activities can be explained with a more detailed look at various 'senders' of CSR related information, or 'communicators' in the field of CSR communication:

As said, **Civil Society organizations** develop and implement information campaigns that are conceptualized in a similar way compared to marketing: the main goal is to reach awareness for the organization and inform a wider public about the main purpose and related activities. One example is the World Health Organization (WHO) which has the following goal:

"Raising awareness and thereby understanding of the effects of climate change on health will facilitate both behavioural change and societal support for the actions needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It can also help in getting health-care professionals to support strategies for mitigation and adaptation that will both improve health and reduce vulnerability" (WHO, 2023).

WHO/Europe is implementing a broad range of activities on climate change and health. They include advocacy campaigns and multimedia products addressing both policy-makers and the general public; a comprehensive set of policy briefs, guidance, tools and training manuals; and engagement in climate fora to raise the prominence of health issues on the climate agenda."

Very similar, **education institutions** seek to inform their key stakeholders, students and staff, but also the community of alumni and future students for example about their activities in the areas of diversity management and inclusion, greening the campus of gender sensitivity. The activities reach from climate change and sustainability related research clusters to on campus events that are sustainability certified, and it also includes recycling systems or water refill-stations. The strategic goals is to transfer facts in and beyond classroom settings. One example is The University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, which developed a Sustainability Strategy, with the following goal:

"Action plans to deliver on the commitments in the UQ Sustainability Strategy are being produced in collaboration with the relevant University areas. Our plans are designed to create a tangible path between where the University is now and where it seeks to be, across each focus topic." (UQ Sustainability Strategy, n.d.).

One example for their communication of sustainability is the Warwick Solar Farm.



Photo by Red Zeppelin on Unsplash

Next to societal institutions in the education sector, even **media corporations** communicate about how they take responsibility and inform their audience – shareholders and target audiences – about their commitment to a more sustainable world and future. The BBC (UK) publishes the following commitment:

"Raising awareness and thereby understanding of the effects of climate change on health will facilitate both behavioural change and societal support for the actions needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.We can't enhance our audiences' understanding of climate change and what's needed to transition to Net Zero unless we are also working on the solutions to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions within our own industry. As a publicly funded organisation, we understand that we have a particular responsibility in this area" (BBC, 2023).

One goal is for example to reduce the environmental impact of their programmes, or talking about sustainability on screen. Communication of sustainability thus includes environmental journalism, climate change reporting as well as documentaries but also the CSR activities as a business, from recycling to reduction of plastic waste.

Next to Universities or schools, **scientific institutions**, from museums to research institutions also transfer scientific results and facts for a better public understanding of science; the focus of the Frauenhofer Institute for example is to play a

"key role in anchoring the concept of sustainability in corporate policy and communication" (ISC, 2023).

**Political institutions** do not only work with civil society-actors and scientific institutions; ministries,

parties, communities, and municipalities seek to inform the people, make people familiar with the political will of parties, the government and with the bureaucratic structures. One example is the European Union, which has been mentioned a couple of times in the CSR context. They communicate in a series of awareness campaigns with the following goal:

"This measure encompasses actions that promote awareness for the altered conditions under climate change and adaptation. However, not all stakeholders are aware and informed about their vulnerability and the measures they can take to pro-actively adapt to climate change. Awareness raising is therefore an important component of the adaptation process to manage the impacts of climate change, enhance adaptive capacity, and reduce overall vulnerability" (Climate ADAPT, n.d.).

At the forefront of communication *of* CSR are **corporations and business**, informing their stakeholders on possible behavior, their projects and strategies with the main goal to improve reputation. The main field of communication of CSR that follow this direction of information transfer is happening under the label of '**corporate reporting**' – mainly on websites, partly on social media, and definitely in official 'non-financial' reports. This is why we want to take a closer look at CSR reporting.

## Corporate / CSR reporting

The first policy documents and mainly the Brundtland report (Hauff, 2007) (see chapter I.2) has stimulated the idea of non-financial reporting. Non-financial means an organization's formal disclosure of information that is not related to finances, financial performance. Non-financial reporting focuses on issues and related activities in an environmental, social or governance dimensions (ESG, see also chapter I.2.). But is not only the CSR strategy that is communicated; CSR, Sustainability or ESG reporting includes measurable actions that an organization takes to tackle environmental problems.

As well, events like the BP Oil Spill or corporate scandals around child labour or working conditions in the garment industry after the burning factory in Bangladesh, have emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability in terms of being responsible towards the society – towards humans and nature. One reaction to those events is that stakeholders increasingly demand information on organization's CSR performance – and allocate responsibility for 'good' behavior to corporates in particular. Thus, there is a growing need of 'not only being socially responsible but also communicating this commitment to the stakeholders through corporate social responsibility reporting to enhance company's reputation' (Perez, 2015; Khan et al., 2020).

At the beginning, large and multinationally operations companies started to publish information on their products and services, their quality, equal opportunities and social benefits for the own employees and the companies social contribution to the communities and environments where they operated (Fifka, 2013), followed by the first non-financial information campaigns, brochures or websites and reports particularly labeled as **Environmental Reports** (Davis-Walling & Batterman, 1997; Halme-Huse, 1997; Buhr, 2002). However, in this first decade of reporting, they were often criticized as 'exercise in public

relations' (Cerin, 2002) or 'add on' to annual financial reports. While environmental reporting was voluntary, it was mostly about gaining recognition, reputation and displaying awareness of a beginning ecological crisis.

This changed with the concepts of Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Social Responsibility in the 1990s, leading to a much deeper reflection about and thus organization of actions in the dimensions of responsibility (environmental and social next to economic), theoretically and philosophically supported by concepts and research in the area of business ethics and corporate communication.

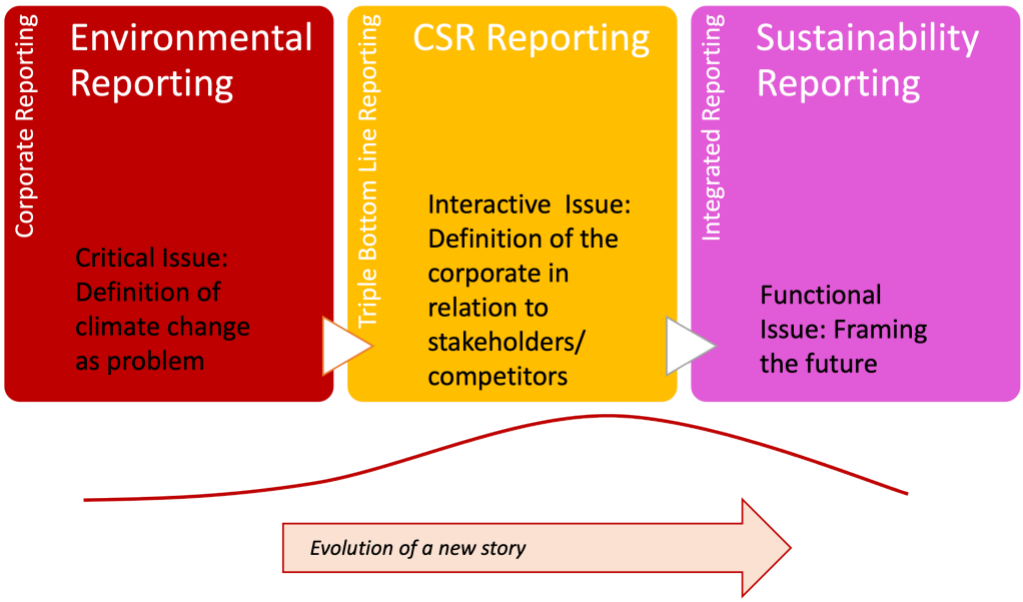



Image: "Development of non-financial reporting" by Franzisca Weder (adaption in Weder, 2023)

As the graph above show, now there is a decent body of knowledge around CSR communication (see again: Golob et al., 2013; Diehl et al., 2017; Weder et al., 2019) and **CSR reporting** in particular (overview in Khan et al. 2020), discussing expectations, impact, accountability, standardization and differences related to culture, size or organizational scope and beyond. CSR reporting dominated corporate communication from the mid 1990ies to 2005, where the first **Corporate *Sustainability* Reports** were published (Schaltegger et al., 2007; Hahn & Kühnen, 2013; Kolk, 2004; Buhr, 2010; Tschopp & Huefner, 2015).

Today, sustainability has become the dominating term that is used to describe the relationship between business and society, while CSR has become a more *comprehensive term*, a term that transformed from being predominantly related to internal business affairs to something that is now part of a broader societal discussion about sustainability (Aslaksen et al., 2021). This development has led to something new, something that is even broader from a terminological perspective, which is 'ESG reporting' (Bose, 2020) and new forms of presenting the sustainability narrative as **Environmental & Social Governance.** As defined in the terminological clean up in part I, the governance aspect includes the 'agency' that is taken for not only the organizational behavior but much more in regards to a certain problem that need to be tackled or public issue. So ESG is a concept that leads to strategic action in a specific issue area related to sustainable

development the branch, industry and issues and organizations deals with. One example: LEGO can't avoid that their product is made of plastic, but they can get engaged in an area, that their product links to and where they can legitimately take responsibility, i.e. in education – check their reporting.

As mentioned above, communication *of* CSR and sustainability is focused on information transfer; thus, CSR reporting helps the organizational stakeholders, in particular shareholders and thus investors, but also civil society organisations, consumers and other key audiences to evaluate the performance of companies with a sustainability and responsibility lense. This goes hand in hand with the development of frameworks for the reporting, especially current developments in Europe. For examples the EU law now requires all large / listed companies to disclose their risks and opportunities arising from social and environmental issues. The need to report their impacts of their activities on people and the environment. This new regulatory framework is part of the European green deal. To secure the measurability as well as comparability, there are new rules on corporate CSR and sustainability reporting, one key example is the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive.

The regulation also makes sense to give shareholders orientation and avoid greenwashing. The EU Taxonomie is a political way to support sustainable activities (in organizations / business with more than 500 employees) with a classification system that helps to clarify which investments are environmentally sustainable – in the context of the European Green Deal. The aim of the taxonomy is also to prevent greenwashing and to help investors make greener choices. In other countries, for example Australia, there is often no legal requirement for non-financial and ESG or sustainability reporting. However there are certain obligations on companies to report both financial and non-financial information in certain industries and areas.

## A couple of ideas for practical reporting:

### How to report?

In a non-financial report, a business or organization can account for its actions and share its short and long-term plans, strategies and envisioned activities for improvement. A CSR report substantiates a company's corporate responsibilitystatement. Rather than simply sharing stated values, it records actions and measures their impact.

## What are the elements of a non-finial report?

- address the most relevant issues for the organization – negotiate the most relevant issues within your organization
- address the issues most pressing by the organization's industry context and its shareholders – and include the local community; use primary & secondary research as well as consultation to uncover the priorities
- articulate a concrete goals for the year ahead
- develop SMART objectives and make clear commitments to achieving specific results, make your objectives measurable
- create a relationship between the actual and previous reports, showing what has improved in a company's operation since its publication; by analyzing CSR reports, stakeholders should be able to track a company's social responsibility journey
- publish and promote the report effectively; use various media environments – and again, create connections to current public issues, create communicative links;
- be accessible: the report should be accessible in terms of its style and how easily the key audiences can obtain it; but also be accessible in terms of the people who speak and represent the organization.

## Structure of a report

- Business overview (provide context about the business, its people and the organizational environment)
- A letter from the CEO (create a key narrative, include personal reflections from the CEO, demonstrate leadership and commitment)
- A summary of progress (reference to previous reporting, progress made, objectives achieved)
- Goals (targets for improvement, based on short, mid and longterm goals)
- Sources and statistics (use references, use primary & secondary research, market data and existing reports and knowledge)
- Case studies (tell a story, use case studies, complementary to hard facts and data;

explain challenges with detail)
- Contact information (be accountable and accessible).

### What about evaluation?

CSR communication needs to be evaluated; criteria are developed in the following frameworks:

- Business For Social Impact (B4SI, formerly LBG)
- B4SI, or the Business For Social Impact, is the global standard for measuringcorporate community investment and philanthropy.
- Global Reporting Initiative (GRI)
- Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB)

## Summary – most important take aways

Communication *of* CSR and sustainability is based on a pragmatic understanding of communication; communication is an instrument or tool that helps to inform the stakeholders and specific target audiences about CSR related activities and programs that an organization (predominantly corporations) put into place to take responsibility towards the society. The most elaborated form of communication of CSR is 'CSR reporting', 'Sustainability reporting' or, more recently, 'ESG reporting'.

From a theoretical perspective, communication *of* CSR is mostly analyzed and explained with a focus on organizations and has thus a rather narrow perspective on CSR-related Public Relations and Marketing activities. Processes of social change and societal transformation processes are not necessarily included in models and concepts that are often developed with a specific goal and for application in communication and management practice. As well, sustainability is a language token used in CSR communication, but not further elaborated as a guiding principle of action on all levels, individual, organizational, social and ecological.

Finally, a lot of attention in research and (communication and consulting) practice is put on the formation of structures to **institutionalize and stabilize CSR** within organizations and the corporate world. This is expressed in an increasing number of resources (fundings, institutions, trainings etc.) as well as rules (policies and frameworks on national / supranational levels, reporting indices etc.).

In the next chapter, the 'complement' to organizational communication and communication of CSR, public discourses on CSR and the key role of the media will be further elaborated.

## Further reading...

More academic literature on CSR reporting:

Aslaksen, H.M., Hildebrandt, C. & Johnsen, H.C.G. The long-term transformation of the concept of CSR: towards a more comprehensive emphasis on sustainability. *Int J Corporate Soc Responsibility* **6**, 11 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40991-021-00063-9

Shabana, K. M., Buchholtz, A. K., & Carroll, A. B. (2017). The institutionalization of corporate social responsibility reporting. *Business & Society*, *56*(8), 1107-1135.

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Khan, M., Hassan, A., Harrison, C., & Tarbert, H. (2020). CSR reporting: A review of research and agenda for future research. *Management Research Review*, *43*(11), 1395-1419.

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Pollach, I., Johansen, T. S., Ellerup Nielsen, A., & Thomsen, C. (2012). The integration of CSR into corporate communication in large European companies. *Journal of Communication Management*, *16*(2), 204-216.

# III.3. COMMUNICATION ABOUT CSR

Franzisca Weder and Marte Eriksen

## The lady...

As I sat there with my almond-milk-cappuccino, I suddenly got angry with the lady. Hey Birkenstock-Lady, you left without telling me what's next? So, corporations are doing great. And they communicate about it. That's awesome. So I can buy the Coke bottle made of 70% recycled plastic and then I'm not quite responsible for climate change, am I? My carbon footprint is anyway not comparable to the emissions of Coca Cola as a big corporation, hm? Or think about Nestlé – they are doing pretty great after being blamed with stealing water in Africa and forcing people to buy the water they sell in plastic bottles – bastards!

But is this my opinion? How much is this opinion framed by what I read about the "big polluters" and nasty corporations destroying our ecological habitats. And it also feels like that the more big corporations communicate about "saving the world", "doing good" and "a better future", the more they are under public observation; the more they communicate their CSR efforts, the more attention people spend on their behaviour and also the more likely they blame them for their misconduct.

Where is opinion created? What role are public discourses and the media playing in CSR communication – how important are the issues that are represented in the media for organizations? These are questions that open up a new dimension of CSR communication: communication *about* CSR. This dimension also includes negotiation processes about if corporations have responsibility and for what, about the instances that secure that those corporates take the allocated responsibility. And it includes the side effects of CSR communication and how (much) especially negative media reporting affects corporations, their reputation and thus their processes and organizational sustainability.

Communication *about* CSR and sustainability is based on an understanding of communication as process of sense- and meaning making. Therefore, communication *about* CSR grounds in a social constructivist paradigm, and, as the following overview shows, it is different to the rather one-directional information based communication processes like CSR reporting which we explored in the previous chapter.

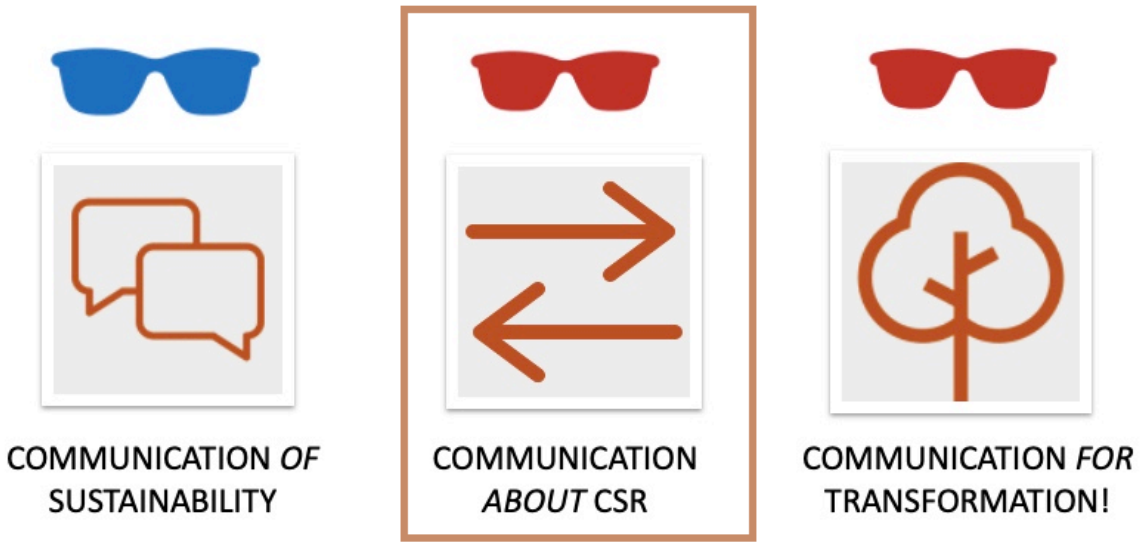



Image: "Dimensions of Sustainability Communication" by Franzisca Weder

Communication about CSR (and sustainability) is further conceptualized as deliberative, again including negotiation processes about the meaning of responsibility and sustainability as normative principle that guides the allocation and taking of responsibility, about the issues that are relevant within a sustainable development framework and the problems that need to be tackled in a multiple crisis scenario, and thus about solutions that are necessary; to summarize:

**Communication about CSR / Sustainability**

*Direction / mode of communication:*

Deliberative, horizontal, many to many

*Function:*

Deliberation, production of intersubjective/shared concepts, frames

The direction of communication about CSR is rather divers; various communication processes produce an understanding of the world and intersubjective and thus shared concepts of individual and organizational behavior within certain social and cultural contexts and situations – and within this world. Communication about responsibility and sustainability is more culture oriented or – vice versa – influenced by those social and cultural contexts. Communication about responsibility and sustainability gives sense and produces knowledge and visions.

## Where is communication about sustainability

## happening?

Who is taking part in these sense making, in public negotiation and deliberation processes? Who talks about responsibility and sustainability in the public and who drives the public discourse?

The so called public sphere has been defined by various media and communication scholars, based on philosophical, sociological and political thinking and theories. One model of the public sphere with a communication focus is a rather structure and system oriented concept of the public sphere embracing all societal subsystems and the media playing a key role in observing the systems and provide a reflection on what the systems are doing (mirror-model, further information). Another concept of the public sphere also has strong focus on communication processes; it grounds in the differentiation of public and private and calls all events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs (Habermas, 1989). Based on this understanding, the Public Sphere is a 'realm of our social life' where public opinion can be formed; for a deliberative democracy access needs to be guaranteed to all citizens. A public sphere for us is a discursive and conversational space in which individuals and groups or networks of individuals can discuss matters of mutual interest. It is also possible to get to an agreement or common sense or even common decision and judgement.

Jürgen Habermas, who is for sure the most prominent sociologist who conceptualized the public sphere, defines the public sphere further as obligatory for a "society engaged in critical public debate" (Habermas); the conditions are that all citizens have access and that in the public sphere a critical discourse, and thus the formation of public opinion can happen (this has been further developed by i.e. Mouffe / Laclau, 2015) . The media reproduce the public sphere, they integrate organizations and societal subsystems in the society (socialization) and individuals in the society, in the societal subsystems (as citizens in politics etc.) and in organizational contexts. Read more about the genesis of the idea and concept of the 'public sphere' in the area of enlightenment and the development of related concepts).

If the focus in on communication as deliberation process related to certain topics, issues and opinions, the we can speak of a **public discourse.** A discourse is defined as communication between people – mostly within a certain structure. a discourse is a debate or 'serious discussion' of a particular topic, event, issue or subject. It constructs the individual experience and understanding of the world (sense making!).

There is a stream at the intersections of sociology, politics and language that explores public discourses with a specific focus on power dynamics and control of discourses and of how the world is perceived (read more), social theory often studies discourse with a focus on power (see Foucault-Habermas debate). Disciplines working with the concept of discourse are as said sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and the so called discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 2001). Without digging deeper in the power dynamics and antagonistic character of the public discourse on social responsibility, one of our key questions in this book is again: Who is communicating about CSR and sustainability, and who are the dominant voices, opinions? And later: what (key) role do the media play in a public CSR discourse?

# Who is participating in public discourses – and what role do the media play?

Again, one of the key actors in the CSR discourse are **civil society organizations** who foster discourses on social change and transformation processes, the implications of the climate crisis and a sustainable future in alternative media, within assemblies, or through social networks.

**Education institutions** play an important role in terms of engagement with different interpretations of the future and sustainable development. The World Economic Forum points to the key role of education ministries, institutions and training facilities in public negotiation processes of agreements to reinforce efforts taken towards sustainable development and the realization of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals:

"…Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) stipulates that education, training, and public awareness on climate change must be pursued. …with negotiations on these global agreements far from complete, it is vital that policymakers' emphasis on education continues to be reinforced…. A strong education system broadens access to opportunities, improves health, and bolsters the resilience of communities — all while fueling economic growth in a way that can reinforce and accelerate these processes. Moreover, education provides the skills people need to thrive in the new sustainable economy, working in areas such as renewable energy, smart agriculture, forest rehabilitation, the design of resource-efficient cities, and sound management of healthy ecosystems. …education can bring about a fundamental shift in how we think, act, and discharge our responsibilities toward one another and the planet. After all, while financial incentives, targeted policies, and technological innovation are needed to catalyze new ways of producing and consuming, they cannot reshape people's value systems so that they willingly uphold and advance the principles of sustainable development. Schools, however, can nurture a new generation of environmentally savvy citizens to support the transition to a prosperous and sustainable future" (World Economic Forum, 2015).

Here, not only education ministries and policy makers, but also schools, universities and **scientific institutions**, play a key role in education *for* sustainability (see next chapter), but also in keeping the discourse going. This has political implications, because a public discourse is seen as closely linked to policy making. But scientific institutions in particular drive the scientific discourse and thus the process of introduction of a new concept. They develop theories and approaches to better understand sustainability and sustainable development, and offer methodologies to study social change and transformation processes. Thus, scientific institutions contribute to the discourse about sustainability and responsibilities

of organizations, and with that, they support the 'normalization' and institutionalization of sustainability as guiding principle of action on an individual, organizational and societal level.

As mentioned, **political institutions** are probably the most influential communicators in the public sustainability discourse. They can raise public awareness and initialize communication on all levels, individual, organizational and societal. Political assemblies, round tables and working groups are the space where the SDGs have been negotiated on a supranational level; furthermore, on a transnational level strategies have been developed like the "Green Deal" in Europe or frameworks like the "taxonomy", mentioned in part I.

Even on a local and community level, citizen forums or public hearings are conversational spaces where sense making around national climate policies or business responsibilities are discussed and decisions negotiated. One example:

"The French city of Antony set up a €600,000 participatory budgeting project to involve residents directly in setting priorities for local sustainable development. Based on the full list of SDGs, the administration defined 20 local issues, including more green spaces, promoting sustainable mobility, and bolstering a circular economy." (Citizen Lab, 2022).

All residents above the age of 16 were able to share proposals and projects to reach one of the predefined goals. These proposals were **discussed** by a dedicated selection committee and put to a **community vote**. 20 winning projects were selected, including planting a microforest, setting up a collective garden and chicken coop, and creating an inventory of local biodiversity. These actions tie into SDG 13 (Climate Action), among others.

In the opposite to their dominance when it comes to communication of CSR and sustainability, **corporations and business**, have been involved in conferences, political discussions and roundtables or workshops around the SDGs or national sustainability strategies – but this not always something they talk about. Today, big corporations do play a major role in global climate change consortiums and meetings, like the 'Conference of the Parties' (COP).




Image: "UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021" by UK Government, is licensed under United Kingdom Open Government Licence v3.0, via Wikimedia Commons




Photo by Matthew TenBruggencate on Unsplash

Business have a significant stake in the conversation at this multinational conference. Company representatives play a key role in shaping the political agendas – which is wanted, because the conference of the parties (COP) states that climate change is too large for governments alone to deal with and businesses need 'long-term certainty for investment' (so the British premier Cameron at COP21.) However, while in political negotiation processes corporations are influential ('lobbying'), this role in shaping change processes and thus the future is only rarely debated in the media.

So it is to state, that **media corporations** do not play a major role themselves when it comes to political decision making, however, they are crucial in societal transformation processes. As introduced at the beginning of the book, in today's "risk society" (Beck, 1992), the climate crisis is not only about global changes and ecological decline but also about the communicative capacity of the society to respond (Hackett et al., 2017, p. 2). Here, **media** (the main means of mass communication: broadcasting, publishing, and the internet) do play critical role!

Therefore, in this section of the book, we want to further explore media representations of crisis narratives, responsibility and sustainability, and how much they not only create and maintain a public discourse on the climate crisis but much more are an important critique and control instance in the society pointing to misbehavior in CSR communication and in transparency in terms of communication about sustainability and related lobbying and policy making behind the curtains.

## Communication about CSR and the media

Let's have a look into the media and check some headlines:

"*Antarctica loses three trillion tons of ice*", "*Red-hot planet: All-time records have been set all over the world during the past week*" – those headlines show how environmental issues, especially issues related to climate change, are communicated in the mass media: with sensational headlines, partly scary, at least full of conflict.

"*Going Zero Waste*", "*Simple solutions for natural living*" – those are titles of sustainability blogs, influencer pages and their social media communication, creating and crafting a different, more positive narrative of the future.

"*Sustainability is the new growth*", "*Less CO2 emissions*", "*indulgence is our nature*" – from a PR and marketing perspective, environmental awareness and sustainability as core value is communicated increasingly by corporates and finds it's representation in social as well as traditional media.

The mass-media are 'key actors' in the identification and interpretation of environmental issues' (Boykoff & Boykoff 2007, 1192) and the general public often relies on the media to help them make sense of large amounts of information, especially when it comes to environmental and climate change related issues. In fact, Hansen (2011) argues that much of what we know about 'the environment' and our relationship to nature comes from media coverage, not only our beliefs and knowledge, but also how we 'view, perceive, value and relate' to the environment.

Without the media, it is unlikely that important problems, environmental or otherwise, would enter the realm of public discourse or become political issues.

What we know (or believe we know) about the world and the environment is largely based upon the information provided by the media sources we are exposed to. 'The environment' emerged as an issue of public concern in the 1960s (Hansen 1991) and while public interest in environmental issues has ebbed and flowed, recent research suggests that it has been increasing since the 1980s, particularly with the advent of climate change as a global issue (Johnston & Gulliver, 2022).

Today, stories about Climate Change, natural hazards and health risks fit perfectly to the media's logic of "only bad news is good news". Alongside reporting on melting glaciers, degrading ecosystems, water scarcity and droughts, almost all green advertisements include strategically communicated images of windmills, solar panels and heavily loaded orange trees, which frames and influences our perception of the environment.

This often controversial or at least critical content is produced and communicated by various professions: journalists who report about the warming climate and increasing rates of extinction of animals and plants across all media (TV, newspapers, magazines, films, social media); however, there is a new story sneaking in the public discourse – a story about balance, harmony and restoration. The sustainability story.

## The lady …

There was a ping. I looked at my phone. I discovered myself being disappointed – it wasn't a message from the lady. Instead I could see an Instagram-notification: "things that I can do with my old IKEA-Billy-shelf. Revamp your old furniture and be green!". I had a look at the other messages that came in: Twitter recommended a Guardian piece on greenwashing. And again, Instagram: a sustainability influencer went zero-waste a year ago. I got frustrated, looking at my keep cup and the coke bottle in my hand.

In a new media environment, sustainability bloggers who promote environmental friendly fashion and sustainable travel modalities, and PR people and marketers who follow a green marketing approach, who conceptualize CSR management, publish their annual sustainability report, realize corporate greening campaigns, sometimes misleading (Cox, 2013, p. 289) or even "greenwashing" corporate behaviour (Weder et al., 2018; Elving et al., 2015; see more below), but definitely trying to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2021). And politicians who also implement environmental issues in their policy and – vice versa – "hop on" issues that seem to be relevant for the corporate world, are irritated by NGOs and activists, stimulating engagement and resistance in relation to global developments, corporate behavior and/or national and regional politics.

Von Zabern and Tulloch (2020) argue that mass media not only reflect, but also actively "contribute to the creation of public discourse and understanding" (p. 26) and cannot be separated from economic and political systems and instead are prone to culturally reproduce these broader economic and political power relationships, echoed by Lester who contended in 2010 that news is constructed through the lens of society and culture.

To summarize, the media have the ability to shape public perceptions and attitudes about scientific issues and therefore have a crucial responsibility themselves (!) to present scientific information and opinions to audiences (Carvalho 2007) and to do this in a ethical and responsible way (Weder & Rademacher, 2023).

So: What about the **media corporations** themselves? Do they need to be responsible?

### CSR and media corporations

Then, CSR communication can be defined as the communication from and about

organizations addressing actions within the organization that are (1) longer term measures (sustainable); and (2) voluntary (not legally bound). The actions reported have (3) a clear connection to the organization's activities, but are not their objective (Weder & Jarolimek, 2017).

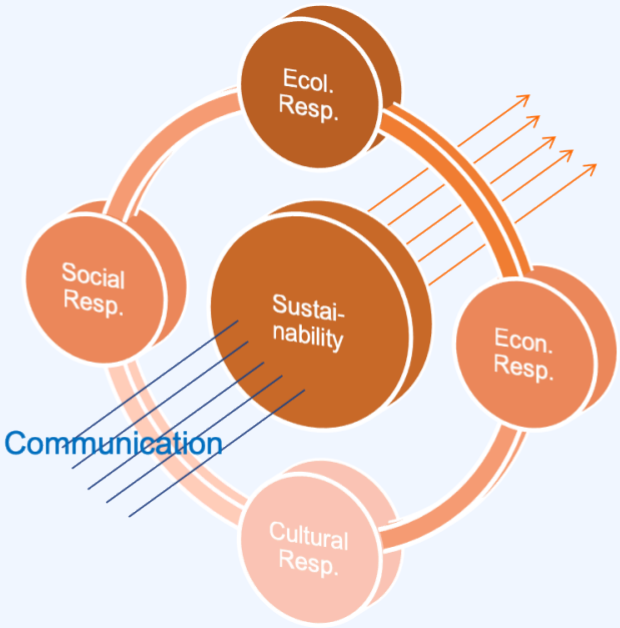



Image by Franzisca Weder

CSR communication is about giving information, responding to current and relevant issues (issue and crisis management) and involvement strategies (*engagement*, *participation*, *community and stakeholder oriented*) (further reading).

Therefore, not only as a side effect, the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has also not left the media industry itself unaffected and becomes more and more relevant for media organizations (Weder et al. forthcoming). According to Trommershausen & Karmasin (2016) or Weder et al. (2021, 2023), the concept of responsibility is of importance to media business and news corporations, going beyond the discussion about press freedom, paywalls and fake news. Media and technology corporations like the BBC, google or facebook are also called upon to ensure public transparency by disclosing information on corporate social and environmental activities. The social responsibility of the media industry (also referred to as Media Social Responsibility; Altmeppen, 2011) shows the relevance of not only communicating *about* sustainability and environmental or social issues, but as well to *communicate sustainable and responsible*! (see BBC example).

Like the BBC points out, it's not only about environmental and social responsibility or sustainable development as concept being represented in the program (or products or

services). Much more, it is about communicating responsible and sustainable by the same time, here labelled as "Greener Broadcasting".

So media corporations have a **dual responsibility!**

They are not only responsible because they

Media corporations are responsible for

- facilitating a sustainability related public discourses,
- offer conversational spaces for negotiation,
- play a key role in sustainability related meaning making processes and thus help to define sustainability as guiding (normative) principle,
- for how the sustainability is told and
- how they present and communicate the climate crisis and
- for what voices are heard – and who is not, thus for the 'quality' of the public discourse around sustainability and responsibility.

But they are also responsible for their own business, and how they respond to current issues as an organization.

If media in a broad understanding play a key role in translating, transmitting and disseminating an awareness of sustainability, they influence the mentioned societal discourses and introduce a certain understanding of the world and the human-nature relationship into social discourse. The media offer the space to problematize certain aspects of sustainability, they "make an issue out of certain topics" like food choices, mobility and transportation challenges or energy sourcing and supply. Furthermore, a certain morality is sneaking into public discourses, the media tell you what is good and bad, they not only problematize and bring in causalities, but also morally evaluate an issue (Entman, 1993).

In this context we need to talk about greenwashing and the role media play in this downside of CSR communication.

## Good to know about …. Greenwashing

Social awareness and concern about climate change have dramatically increased since the turn of the millennium. Organisations are under increased environmental scrutiny now that organisational activity has been linked to an increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Rosenberg et al., 2019).

Environmental challenges and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been shown to influence both consumer and stakeholder behaviour. As a result, investors, stakeholders, and customers prefer to deal with ethically 'green' businesses and projects rather than unethical ones (Pimonenko et al., 2020). Yet, due to the usage of greenwashing tactics by businesses, the rise in environmental information provided by businesses has also been accompanied by social doubts about its reliability (Mateo-Márquez et al., 2022).

Globally, people are becoming more aware of misleading or outright false environmental claims made by businesses, non-profits, and even governments when outlining their stances on environmental and climate change-related topics. These assertions can be used to boost an organization's reputation, its relationships with clients and staff, or short-term financial success. All while avoiding the more significant effort, investment and/or reforms that are required to drastically reduce environmental harm. Greenwashing is still prevalent despite this rising awareness. According to a recent analysis of 500 international websites conducted by the UK's Competition and Markets Authority and the Netherlands Authority for Consumers and Markets (as part of the International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network), about 40% of 'green' organisational claims could be considered greenwashing (Nemes et al., 2022).

The phrase 'greenwashing' refers to a broad range of deceptive communications and behaviours that, whether on purpose or not, create falsely favourable opinions of an organization's environmental performance. There are several levels of greenwashing, which can be carried out by businesses, governments, politicians, research organisations, international organisations, banks, NGOs, etc. It can vary from modest exaggeration to outright falsification. In summary, spreading incorrect or misleading information about an organisation's environmental plans, aims, motives, and actions is "greenwashing" (Nemes et al., 2022).

The six forms of greenwashing are (see Greenwashing: 6 reasons why businesses do it for further information):

1. Greenhushing – Understating or concealing sustainability credentials to avoid investor scrutiny.
2. Greenrinsing – Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) aims are frequently modified before being attained.
3. Greenlabelling – Selling a product as sustainable, but a closer look reveals that the claim is false.
4. Greenshifting – Accusing the customer.
5. Greenlighting – Highlighting a green initiative, no matter how little, to divert attention

away from behaviours, organisations, or goods that are not sustainable.

6. Greencrowding – depending on the principle of "safety in numbers" and the observation that the majority of people move slowly.

Additionally, greenwashing worsens consumers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Furlow, 2010), and it appears to have a negative impact on consumers' opinions of brands (Parguel et al., 2011), their levels of green trust (Chen & Chang, 2013), their perceptions of the environmental sustainability of corporations (Mason & Mason, 2012), their attitudes towards particular brands (Gatti et al., 2019), as well as their word-of-mouth (Chen, Lin, & Chang, 2014).

## Consequences of Greenwashing

In 2015, researchers discovered that Volkswagen had installed specific software in some of their diesel vehicles. This software, referred to as a 'defeat device', allowed the vehicle to pass laboratory testing, while in general use emitting more than 40 times the emissions allowed in the U.S.A. (Jung & Sharon, 2019).

This can be classified as greenwashing and led to one of the largest corporate scandals in history. For Volkswagen, it reportedly resulted in losses of €7 billion in profits, as well as reputational and investments damage (the value of Volkswagen's shares fell by 25%).

The fallout from this controversy was not just restricted to Volkswagen. It also led to a decrease in investor interest in the auto industry more broadly, and a decrease in consumer trust in the "Made in Germany" brand. Across the publicly listed automobile companies at the time, a 3–14% decline was seen in the value of their shares in 2015 (BMW by 88%, Honda by 13.73%, Ford by 12.42%, Mercedes by 6.51%, Fiat by 5.97%, General Motors by 4.32%, and Toyota by 3.24%) (Pimonenko et al., 2020).

Greenwashing also appears to have a negative impact on the company's financial results. While greenwashing can occasionally be used to successfully divert attention away from poor CSR behaviour, it frequently appears to have a negative financial impact on businesses. Especially in the current environment, marked by intense scrutiny from civil society and rising stakeholder scepticism. Even when corporate communications are not deceptive and the accusation of greenwashing is unfounded, it can have a detrimental impact on the credibility and reputation of the company in question. Indeed, if the public thinks that the corporation is self-promotional, corporate CSR communications could backfire on the organisation. Because it is not profitable, businesses are now less driven to reduce their environmental impact. Hence, greenwashing eventually harms the environment as well as customers, businesses, and the public at large (Gatti et al., 2019).

# Summary – most important take aways

Communication *about* CSR and sustainability is based on a constructivist understanding of communication; communication is happening on an intra- and interpersonal level, within organization and beyond and in a wider public sphere, conceptualized as 'public discourse'. Communication are all processes of sense making, where an understanding and interpretation of the world is generated.

The media play a crucial role for the emergence and sustainability of the CSR related discourse. From a theoretical perspective, communication *about* CSR is mostly analyzed and explained with a focus on media and issues that are represented in traditional and new, digitalized forms of media. Over the years, the climate change story is now **established** in media reporting, as well as critical cases of greenwashing – both fit to the 'bad stories are good stories'-logic of the media; however the sustainability story is less present in public discourses. Still, sustainability is a language token or 'buzz word' used in CSR communication (see chapter III.2.), the reporting on corporate misconducts, in transparency and 'washing' activities, but not further elaborated as a guiding principle of action on all levels, individual, organizational, social and ecological. Social transformation processes, sustainable development also don't fit to the media logic of actual and on-time information and a relatively quick turnover from one highly mediated event to the next.

In the next chapter we will look at a different way to approach CSR and sustainability communication and identify communication processes that contribute to a socio-economic transformation process.

## Further reading...

More academic literature on CSR & sustainability in the media:

*CSR & the media:*

Weder, F., Rademacher, L., Schmidpeter, R. (2023). *CSR Communication in the Media.* Media Management on Sustainability at a Global Level. Wiesbaden et al.., Springer.

Tench, R., Bowd, R., & Jones, B. (2007). Perceptions and perspectives: Corporate social responsibility and the media. *Journal of Communication Management*, *11*(4), 348-370.

Schlichting, I. (2013). Strategic framing of climate change by industry actors: A meta-analysis. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, *7*(4), 493-511.

Barkemeyer, R., Figge, F., Hoepner, A., Holt, D., Kraak, J. M., & Yu, P. S. (2017). Media coverage of climate change: An international comparison. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, *35*(6), 1029-1054.

Voci, D. (2022). Logos, ethos, pathos, sustainabilitos? About the role of media companies in reaching sustainable development. *Sustainability*, *14*(5), 2591.

Fischer, D., Haucke, F., & Sundermann, A. (2017). What does the media mean by 'sustainability'or 'sustainable development'? An empirical analysis of sustainability terminology in German newspapers over two decades. *Sustainable development*, *25*(6), 610-624.

Fischer, D., Lüdecke, G., Godemann, J., Michelsen, G., Newig, J., Rieckmann, M., & Schulz, D. (2016). Sustainability communication. *Sustainability Science: An Introduction*, 139-148.

Newig, J., Schulz, D., Fischer, D., Hetze, K., Laws, N., Lüdecke, G., & Rieckmann, M. (2013). Communication regarding sustainability: Conceptual perspectives and exploration of societal subsystems. *Sustainability*, *5*(7), 2976-2990.

Kim, S., & Ferguson, M. T. (2014). Public expectations of CSR communication: What and how to communicate CSR. *Public Relations Journal*, *8*(3), 1-22.

*Greenwashing:*

Seele, P., & Gatti, L. (2017). Greenwashing revisited: In search of a typology and accusation-based definition incorporating legitimacy strategies. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *26*(2), 239-252.

Vollero, A. (2022). Greenwashing: Foundations and Emerging Research on Corporate Sustainability and Deceptive Communication.

Elving, W. J., Golob, U., Podnar, K., Ellerup-Nielsen, A., & Thomson, C. (2015). The bad, the ugly and the good: new challenges for CSR communication. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *20*(2), 118-127.

# III.4. COMMUNICATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Franzisca Weder

## The lady...

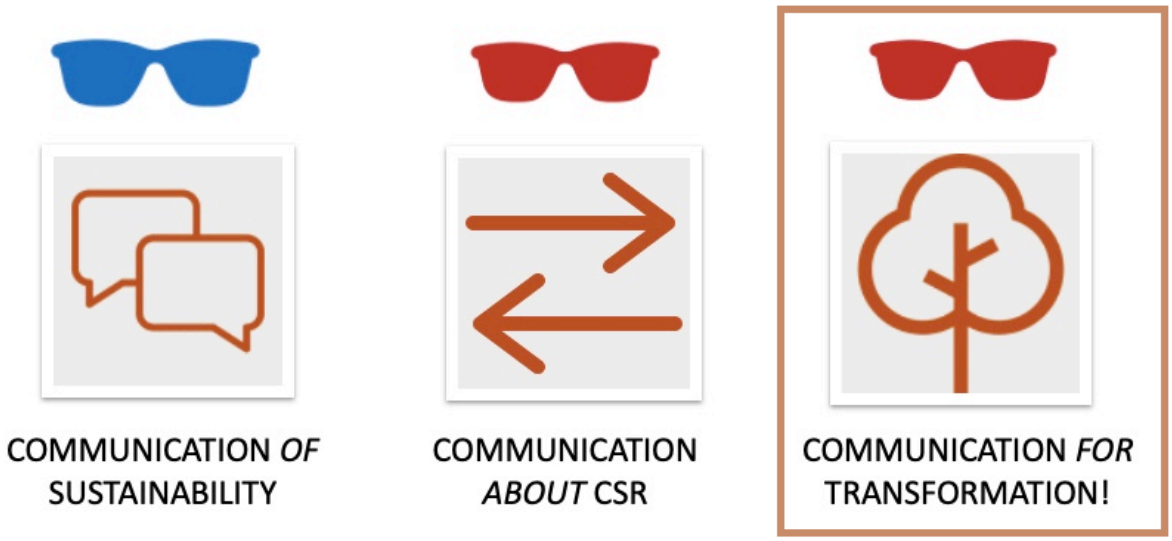
I decided to go home. It's been a long day. I passed a toy shtop, displayed were cars, puzzles, board games and books. But what was that? There, in the 'pink' corner of the shop window, I spotted a new set of Barbies – a set of four Barbie-dolls, labelled as the "Barbie ECO-LEADERSHIP TEAM". A boy created with the Jane Goodall Institute. The Gorilla Lady! OMG. I couldn't believe it ... I took a photo.

Something is changing, I thought to myself. Something is happening here. If an 'Activist', a 'Conservation Scientist' and even a 'Chief Sustainability Officer' are now the new role-models for kids, then social change and transformation towards a more sustainable future is actually happening. I rang the lady ...

In part II of this book we introduced the two main theoretical paradigms that direct different understandings and interpretations of communication. The pragmatic, functionalist paradigm on the one hand and the (social) constructivist paradigm on the other hand. This was the starting point to the differentiation between communication *of* CSR and sustainability and communication *about* responsibility and sustainability as two complementary perspectives. CSR communication, and CSR, sustainability and ESG reporting in particular were discussed in chapter III.2., where communication is used as tool or instrument to inform stakeholders and certain target audiences about CSR activities and programs. In chapter III.3, we defined the public discourse about corporate responsibility and the crucial role of the media in facilitating this discourse *about* CSR and sustainability. Based on existing research and practical insights, we stated that while the climate change story and the negative side of CSR communication (greenwashing) are represented in the media and thus in public discourses, the sustainability story, the story about sustainable development and a more balanced human-nature relationship, is less present in the media.

However, the sustainability story is told – maybe less in the media, but more in other forms of

communication and conversational formats. Therefore, in this final chapter we want to open a new dimension to CSR and sustainability communication, the dimension of **communication for sustainable development and transformation**.




Graphic: Dimensions of CSR communication" by Franzisca Weder

This is based on a critical and constructivist perspective, but goes beyond. If we integrate thinking from organizational communication scholars who define communication as constitutive for organization and further talk about communication as 'organizing' process in our society (Schoeneborn, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2008; Taylor & Van Every, 2010), then communication is even more relevant for any form of societal transformation processes. Whenever we communicate, we organize. That's the claim for these authors and scholars following the CCO-perspective (communicative constitution of organizations). This includes – as said – social constructivist thinking on sense- and meaning making, where communication is explained as"enactment of the social world, constituting it through text and verbal descriptions that are communicated to and negotiated with others" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). But it offers two more key aspects:

- if communication 'organizes' interpersonal relationships, connections between organizations and their stakeholders as well as the emergence and manifestation of new values and norms within organizations and beyond, then **narratives** play a key role (Weick, 1995; Mumby, 1993). Based on the understanding of humans as 'storytelling animals' (MacINtyre, 1981, p. 201), we can agree with Mumby that narratives provide individuals accounts of any processes of organizing (1987, p. 113). A narrative or a story is the organizing element and thus the manifestation of certain cultural pattern or norms.
- an additional important element to look at in transformation processes are **conversations**, which are described as sense making in action. Sense making can then further be explained as process of narrativization or narrative-making. A narrative consists on hidden patterns in conversations, these patterns are the "organization" of a conversation (Taylor & Van Every, 2011, p. 21). A conversation is basically the unit or sequence that can be looked at where communicating as organization and

therefore narrativization happens.

Therefore, communication for transformation is less directed or one-way, it is rather self-organized and participatory and happens in a specific context as 'many-to-one' process. One key character is that communicating (instead of communication) is open, it includes a process of 'cultivation' where new patterns, new norms can emerge.

**Communication for Transformation**

Direction / mode of communication:

Participative, self-organized, many to one

Function:

Participative, sense- and meaning-making, social change, cultivation

In this chapter, we will focus on 'communicating' complementary to communication to capture a wider range of conversations that are part of a socio-economic transformation. We will explore these conversations again in the different societal areas (civil society, education, corporate world etc.), and then focus on the cultivation of a new norm (sustainability) in those conversations.

**Civil Society organizations:** Nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, social and environmental movements and networks are often a form of self-organized cooperative. They work collaboratively and participatory and are not (only) focused on exert political pressure but also communicating for change by offering a counter-narrative to the existing and often more established ones. One example is Extinction Rebellion (XR). From the beginning, Extinction Rebellion stimulated local conversations at the points of action and rebellion and on a public level and transformed the global conversation about and around the climate crisis. By means of 'civil obedience' and 'rebellion', they led political institutions and even nations to declare a climate *emergency*. With that, XR had changed the conversation from crisis to an 'emergency', from global warming to social and ecological collapse and mass extinction. From a theoretical perspective, narrating the socio-ecological problems in a new way has established new patterns of meaning and cultivated a new understanding of 'ecological emergency' and opened a wider scope of ways to act.

**Education institutions** have identified different ways to create conversational spaces for participation in change processes. They encourage staff and students and related stakeholder (future students, parents, local community) to take action and authorship, in the classroom and beyond. There is an increased awareness for the need for inclusive, place based and local projects and participatory approaches. So called 'participatory communication' facilitates equitable engagement of individuals, groups and stakeholders in change processes. Individuals and groups are involved in and impacted by these communicatively facilitated change processes. One example is the PEATLI project organized by the Center for Communication

and Social Change at the University of Queensland (Brisbane / Australia). Peatli stands for 'Peatland community Engagement And Transdisciplinary Learning – Indonesia' and brings students from different disciplines (law, environmental management, communication) to Indonesia to conduct a multi-stakeholder consultation exercise at national, provincial, district and community level:

"This consultation is focused on one complex issue of concern for the host organisation, which is the *restoration* and utilisation of degraded peatlands. Based on these stakeholder consultation, students will formulate recommendations for enhanced community engagement to support the sustainability of projects and programs run by the host organisations. For the fieldwork, PEATLI participants (from UQ) team up with students from Universitas Indonesia or Universitas Brawijaya who will help with translations" (The University of Queensland, n.d.).

With this project, students take not only action but they also create impact and develop authorship for transformation process in a specific (place-based, local) context.

Similar to education institutions, **scientific institutions** take part in a social transformation process by not only fostering sustainability related research, but also in a way of creating a normative approach in their work. This includes transdisciplinarity and a stronger focus on translating research insights into practice. One example is the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Madison University (Washington), which has the mission to:

"…develop and apply social science insights to help society make informed decisions that will stabilize the earth's life-sustaining climate, and prevent further harm from climate change" (Center for Climate Change Communication, 2020).

Visit Our Programs to learn more about their activities.

Another example is The International Environmental Communication Association (The IECA), a professional nexus of practitioners, teachers, scholars, students, artists and organizations engaged in research and action to find more ethical and effective ways to communicate about environmental concerns in order to move society towards sustainability. Their mission is one way to communicate for change, "to foster effective and inspiring communication that alleviates environmental issues and conflicts, and solves the problems that cause them" (IECA, n.d.).

**Political institutions** are first of all responsible for the implementation and the stabilization of structures that enable sustainable development.

One example is the Global Compact, the greatest corporate sustainability effort in the world created by the UN's Organisation for Sustainable Business. The Global Compact is made up by more than 20,000 members throughout 160 nations. Currently, Norway is one of about 70 local UN Global Compact networks spread across all continents. One of the regional networks with the fastest growth in membership is UN Global Compact Norway (Global Compact, 2023).

The UN Global Compact, which includes more than 10,800 businesses based in more than 150 countries, is the largest worldwide corporate sustainability project. The CEO of the participating

companies must agree to the programme because it is voluntary and based on principles. The 10-principle framework directs ethical business in the areas of labour, environment, anti-corruption, and human rights, and it connects these efforts to the SDG's goals (BH4S, 2023).

But political institutions need to go beyond stabilization and question these larger frameworks; what does it mean for small and medium sized corporations? What does in mean in different cultural contexts? What does a global compact mean on a local level: one example for a decentralized approach and a translation of the global compact areas is to strengthen local organizations while reducing dependence on Governments and Administration are so called Self-Help-Groups, which engage the community in decision-making processed. The SHG in Palayanur village in Tamil Nadu trained 100 villagers in nursing and computer skills, enabling more lucrative employment opportunities and greatly uplifting the socio-economic conditions in the village. This shows the effectiveness of involving local communities in identifying local solutions for their specific local challenges.

Part of **media corporations** responsibility (see chapter III.3) is to facilitate conversations about climate change, socio-ecological transformation processes and sustainable development on a larger scale. There are various related media initiatives, i.e. editorial sections that have been established over the years to stabilize the public discourse on the crisis and possible solutions. One example is the Environment section of The Guardian.

At the beginning of the chapter, we introduced communication as organizing principle, as new pattern that is introduced in form of a new narrative. Communicating in a different way re-organizes communication. Going beyond opening a new editorial section as conversational space, we can also refer to the Guardian regarding their decision in 2019 to reframe climate change to climate crisis and global warming to global heating. **Corporations and business** are not only responsible for their own activities. On the one hand, they establish, manifest and maintain new organizational structures to secure CSR within the organization. One example are management standards, like ISO 26000 (2023).

ISO 26000 is the international standard for companies and organisations dedicated to conducting business in a socially responsible manner. After five years of negotiations involving numerous various parties around the world, the standard was finally introduced in 2010. It was developed with input from government, NGOs, business, consumer, and labour organisations from all around the world, thus it reflects an international consensus.

The application of ISO 26000 is increasingly seen as a means of evaluating an organization's commitment to sustainability and its overall performance. Unlike several other well-known ISO standards, ISO 26000:2010 gives recommendations rather than requirements, hence it cannot be certified to. Instead, it assists in defining social responsibility, assisting companies and organisations in turning ideals into practical actions, and disseminating worldwide best practises in the area. No matter what they do, how big they are, or where they are located, all kinds of organisations are targeted.

But again, communication for sustainability and participating in socio-ecological transformation processes goes beyond. As a corporate citizen, they participate in social change and can help to cultivate new principles of action like sustainability. They are continuously communicating *for* change by for example displaying solutions and collaborating with regional and local players, funding bodies and civil society organizations to enable change. One case is the following:

"One-acre farm is a highly profitable, mixed-farm near Lake Victoria in Uganda, East Africa. The small farm was designed by farmer and veterinarian Dr. Emma Naluyima. By emulating nature's cyclical and regenerative processes, Emma's farm generates multiple revenue streams and significantly reduces running costs and waste. This leads to much higher profits" (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, n.d.).

This is a case study funded and supported by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, the world's leading circular economy network, bringing together businesses, policymakers, innovators, universities, cities, philanthropic organisations and thought leaders to build and scale a circular economy, with a long list of strategic partners, including Ikea, Gucci, Philips and Cocoa Cola.



Photo by Mick Haupt on Unsplash

Not only for business, communication *for* sustainability and transformation goes beyond reputational aspects; it does have effects on corporate behavior, management and on a larger scale on the logic of the economic system. One example for a not-business or not-market focused organization is a so called "repair café". These small organizations or better: locations provide people with a place to gather and work on repairing everyday objects (electronics, devices, computers, bikes, clothing etc.). They are a non-*capitalist* initiative, a new type of organization that establishes new patterns of behavior.



Photo by Blaz Erzetic

Repair cafes are an example for small *non*-commercial repair ecosystems, the organizing principle and 'normative framework' that drives them is a counter narrative to the consumer and "throwaway" society and capitalistic economy. They represent a different relationship to objects and how this can be transmitted by practicing repair and teaching individuals who are not familiar with the issue of product durability, socializing them through a new practice of new patterns, to a new 'reflex of repair' (Madon, 2022).

The relevance of sustainability-related communication to achieve sustainable development (Newig et al., 2013; Weder, 2021) becomes obvious looking at repair cafés. Communication for sustainability and transformation includes:

- **Participation** through introducing bottom-up concerns, ideas & solutions into the society,
- **Problematization** by creating societal awareness of sustainability related problems,
- **Deliberation, antagonism** by highlighting different perceptions & narratives of sustainable development, pluralvocacy (framing), embracing conflicts, and
- **Capacity building** by enabling individuals to take authorship, to play an active role in/for sustainable development.
- Additionally, a repair café creates **conversational spaces** as 'outcome' or 'organized form of communication' that emerges from communicating in a specific way. We remember: narratives consist on hidden patterns in conversations, these patterns are the 'organization' of a conversation, which is then basically the *unit* or *sequence* that can be looked at where communicating as organization and therefore narrativization happens.

Apparently a key aspect in communication *for* sustainability and transformation is that every individual or group related behavior enforces related *norms* as one element of these patterns of narrativization. Therefore, contextual components of communication and culture influence and potentially direct the 'organization' of a conversation. If sustainability is a principle of action, a guiding idea with a normative

character and it can be potentially brought to life in ever (communicative) action, it has the potential to become part of the way of doing things and thus our culture, patterns and rules of obligation (normative frameworks). This will be described as 'cultivation of sustainability' in the following:

## Cultivation of Sustainability

As outlined in this chapter, socio-ecological change and transformation related to a new norm (sustainability) including the *formation of new patterns* of behavior can happen through sense- and meaning making processes and participatory forms of communication. And every conversation has the potential to do that.

One more tangible example of how communication organizes and creates contingent conversations and of how communication is actually sense- and meaning making is **framing**. Framing happens in every communication process and is a way of organizing communication. Framing includes the definition of a problem and moral evaluation and judgement (Entman, 1993). Other authors dealing with framing, for example Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) or Cappella and Jamieson (1997) also speak of framing as problem definition, justification and evaluation as well as as a loose proposal for solutions. Additionally, there are authors who define 'Issue-specific frames' (de Vreese , 2005) as patterns that structure and organize communication. More generally, a frame is a pattern of interpretation (Weder, 2021) that builds 'communicative tension' and potentially leads to further communication and structures a conversation and even discourses at a higher social discourse level. Frames can also imply a positive or negative sentiment, can be prognostic or diagnostic (Snow & Benford 1992) or even motivational. Framing is always linked to a specific cultural context (Gamson et al. 1992, p. 384; p. 384; van Gorp 2007: 60) and has the potential to change cultural patterns .

### More on framing theory

Watch Framing (YourTube, 20m43s) to learn more about this theory.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=71#oembed-1*

The emergence of new patterns or interpretations of for example objects and their durability in a repair cafe concept creates a certain **communicative tension** that stimulates change. The tension between opposing

positions arises from the fact that one's own position is classified as 'should', the counter-opinion as 'being'. The power of attraction between the two positions in the sense of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) leads to attention and interest in starting disputes and negotiation processes, always in search of consensus. (Weder, 2022). The less a position corresponds to the 'obvious' or established patterns of interpretation, the more irritating it is perceived and thus the more cognitive processing it simulates.

Thus, the less an event or the 'logic' of a repair café fits into existing cultural interpretation patterns and thus corresponding overarching discourses and narratives, the sooner the process of problem definition, evaluation, the comparison between 'being' and 'should' begins. This process can also be initiated, stimulated and strategically planned. With a concept of dialectic in mind (Ketschau, 2019), communication *for* transformation on the one hand includes the stabilizing elements that have been discussed in the previous chapters, but on the other hand it requires active questioning, or *problematization* (Weder, 2021b), processes of contestation, stimulation of dissent and an ongoing testing and legitimatization of (hegemonic) arguments and cultural patterns (Wodak, 2018).

> Communication is thus not only an *organizing* but also a *performative process* and is a key for (bottom-up) transformation – and the deep naturalization of a new norm.

With the difference between perspectives transformation can be collaboratively generated (Milstein & Pulos, 2015). With questioning and related conversations and negotiation processes, sustainability can be turned into a field of **conversational contestation** – which is a very different approach to norms, a transformative perspective for sure, which brings in a contextual and cultural dimension, as mentioned above (Weder, 2023).

## Good to know about … culture

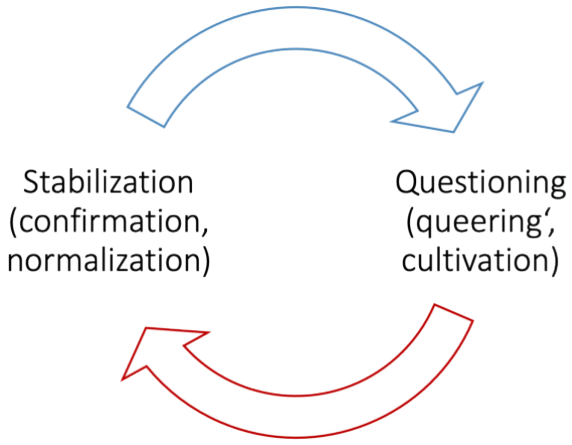
To understand communication for transformation as cultivation process, we need a broad understanding of culture, which refers to all domains of human life, or a specific *way of life*. Culture includes all our activities requiring the transfer, understanding or construction of meaning and value (Hall, 1997); the vision of a culture of sustainability is described in terms of a 'culture of moderation', a 'culture of attentiveness' towards plants, animals or humans, or as 'culture of preservation and nurture' (Cernea, 1993). This is more recently explored in the context of organizational culture, explaining sustainability related organizational culture as shared beliefs about the importance of social responsibility and human-nature balance

(Iacob, 2020). This also includes the understanding of communication having a collaborative character – inside and outside of organizations (Ketprapakorn & Kantabutra, 2022).

Culture enables, integrates, coordinates, organizes and brings together all aspects of sustainable action (Weder, 2022, 2021; Soini & Dessein, 2016) and is therefore the root and also the result of all human action and human decisions. Sustainable social practices – again, as in repair cafes, see above – can have a cultural impact if they relate to the principle of sustainability. Then, cultivation means reproducing sustainability, by communication sustainability can be culturally anchored as a new norm.

## Summary – most important take aways

Communication *for* sustainability and transformation is based on a constructivist understanding of communication – but goes beyond. A critical and reflective perspective on communication is added which includes processes of problem definition (problematization), moral evaluation, and questioning. Conversations are the overarching sequence of organizing communication processes. Therefore, whenever we, groups, or organizations communicate, they organize – they create meaning and potentially new norms like sustainability. The main take away from this chapter is that communication is not only an *organizing* but also a *performative process* and plays a crucial role for (bottom-up) transformation – and the deep naturalization of a new norm.




Graphic: "Stabilization and questioning" by Franzisca Weder

This naturalization of a new norm happens through a dialectic process of stabilization (institutionalization of the sustainability goals) and questioning and reflection.

## Further reading...

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# CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

We hope you are inspired to investigate CSR communication structures and processes more – considering that sustainability is a guiding principle or norm. In the concluding remarks, we will share some reflections on sustainable communication and an outlook for applications and future academic research in the area of CSR Communication and Cultures of Sustainability.

# SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATION?

Franzisca Weder

From a broader perspective, sustainability has to be differentiated from sustainable development. Sustainable is used to describe something that is able to be sustained, that is capable of being continued at a certain level. Going back to the 1980s, sustainability is the principle to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987; Mebratu, 1998). However, sustainability is now less interpreted as framework or principle, but much more as processes and actions through which the depletion of natural resources is avoided. This includes all activities that foster the ecological balance and follow the principle of restoration, meaning to keep ecosystems operating. However, the literature on sustainability as well as its application in strategies and practices shows that sustainable development is rather an economic principle and not yet looked at from an environmental or nature perspective. It is about the "needs" of future generations, it is about the way we "deal with" resources; it is about the stability and growth of systems – economic, environmental and social (Holmberg, 1992; Harris, 2003) – which represents a conflict to the existing economic system of growth. It gets even trickier if we look at this from a media and communication perspective. In public and mainly corporate communication, sustainability is used as buzzword or catchphrase often without any further explanation, definition or solutions (Krainer & Weder, 2011); without being embedded in a new narrative of balance, co-creation and ecocultural identity and inter-being (Milstein xx; xxx), replacing the old narrative of (economic) growth, ecological destruction and human mastery over nature.

We've learned that communication about and of sustainability is already an established research field at the intersections of Public Relations, Strategic Communication, Marketing and Business Studies. However, we've also learned about the limitations and that sustainability is always accompanied by imprecisions, contradictions and cognitive dissonances on an individual and interpersonal but also on an organisational and community level. Sustainability or discussions about sustainable development are always embedded in patterns of social practices, of cultural perception and related action. Sustainability research therefore stands for a paradigm shift within science. And here, communication as a discipline comes in – and complements existing approaches and perspectives. There is an increasing number of critical communications scholars, rolling up the field from behind (Weder, 2020; Davidson 2018; 2017; Hoffmann, 2018; Whelan, 2013; Roper, 2012; Banerjee, 2008; Pompper, 2015; L'Etang, 2008). They are trying to overcome the functionalist and instrumental perspective on communication that dominates most of the CSR literature as well as the first studies on Sustainability Communication. At the same time, these authors see the potential in thinking about sustainability in a critical way and focussing on sustainability as narrative that is co-created on interpersonal, organisational and even social levels. They deal with:

- cognitive dissonances and conflicts as well as consumption practices on an individual level,
- issues of diversity and inclusion on an organisational level,

- and with sustainability as social and cultural transformation process.

With this literature at hand, this textbook introduces new pathways to understand the value and potential of sustainability for communication practitioners and academics; the potential for communication professionals and journalists to communicate about and for sustainability, the value of communicating sustainably, and the transformative potential of telling the sustainability story from an organisational perspective.

To recap the main ideas, check the videos:

Watch Sustainability communication (YouTube, 5m55s)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=758#oembed-1*

Watch Communication ethics (YouTube, 5m21s)



*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/stratcommsustainability/?p=758#oembed-2*

Thus, we conclude this chapter by pointing out that the paradigms of communication are needed as "toolbox" to differentiate between:

- the functional, instrumental perspective on communication: which builds the groundwork for studies and established concepts of *communication about & of CSR and sustainability* and
- the critical, constructivist perspective on communication, which leads us to a better understanding of communication *for* sustainability and *sustainable communication*.

# OUTLOOK

Franzisca Weder

## The lady...

At the beginning of this book on **CSR Communication and Cultures of Sustainability**, we met a lady; we started communicating, we got her off her bike, listened to her and her thoughts and reflections, and together we started to put communication of and about CSR into question and shared our thoughts on communication for sustainability and transformation.

CSR communication includes thinking about sustainability communicators, sustainability stories and best practices of sustainability communication, CSR related audiences and stakeholders, as well as the potential to cultivate sustainability as universal value in and through (social) media channels, public discourses and conversational spaces. The first part of the book offered a terminological clean up and background knowledge around CSR and Sustainability studies. In these chapters, processes and structures of communication were identified as the missing link to fully grasp socio-ecological transformation processes and explore the key role of organizations in these processes of social change. Therefore, we introduced the main (sociological) paradigms that are used to understand communication, it's direction, dynamic, function and potential effects. We also explored what aspects of CSR and sustainability communication are already researched and which disciplines deal with CSR communication and sustainability. From there, we developed a framework to look at the different dimensions of CSR and sustainability communication: **Communication *of* CSR**, **Communication *about* CSR** and **Communication *for* Sustainability**.

In the last chapter, we developed an innovative concept to understand the **dialectic between stabilization** (establishment of CSR in organizations and a sustainability related discourse in public discourses, facilitated by the media) and **questioning and critical reflection** (in negotiations, deliberative processes in participatory conversational spaces – within organizations or *as* 'organized form' between organizations and their stakeholder. These conversational spaces emerge alongside a (new) narrative, here: the sustainability story. Or in other words: conversational spaces can be identified where sustainability is communicated, debated, and negotiated and therefore slowly introduced, reproduced and established as new norm.

At the end of our learning journey, we conclude:

- Sustainable development is a public issue.
- There are multiple ways to participate in this issue communicatively.
- You can not not communicate, communicating sustainability organizes the socio-ecological transformation!

A couple of final thoughts on that in the following.

## Sustainability – all over the place...

One main driver in the cultivation of sustainability as a new norm is the increasing thematization of sustainability within the context of CSR. Every CSR related project, activity and single event (new recycling technology, public lectures, climate change documentary, community garden etc.) leaves 'normative footprints' on the level of social discourses (Rössler, 2005). Media take part in this cultivation process as organizers of social communication (Altmeppen, 2006), as 'hub' between interpersonal, organizational and social communication flows (Weder, 2012). Thematization processes lead to overarching (normative) patterns that stay, that are stabilized by repeated connections which are made and which enable further communication.

In media and communication studies, so called theme cycle models describe the 'career chances' of a specific issue and how (much) this depends on whether it can be connected to other, especially overarching discourses of public communication, and existing normative frameworks and perspectives to look at it (Gerhards, 1993, Snow et al., 1986). A discourse emerges through the links between events and 'associated interpretations'. But it also depends on how much organizations make an issue out if it. Then discourses are "interplays of utterances and counter-expressions", of opinions and counter-opinions or interpretations and counter-interpretations that are linked in a certain conversational space (Wessler , 1999, Fairclough, 1993).

The dialectic of stabilization and critical reflection is what we developed in our thinking about socio-economic transformation processes and the role of communication. Lütgens (2001) describes 'polarization' between the 'being' and the 'should', between the different opinions as dynamic that increases a thematic cycle. Discourses are communication in action or 'communicative action' (cf. Habermas 1981); with Foucault they are larger negotiation processes of truths or values (2020), or defined by opposing positions or opinions (Bourdieu, 1991). The patterns of interpretation can form, define or limit a (mediated public) discourse.

Organizations (corporations, political institutions, civil society organizations, media etc.) have the communicative responsibility to not only participate in this discourse (issue management), but also to take responsibility for a validation, stabilization and structure formation on the one hand and continuous reflection and questioning of these structures (management system, reporting criteria etc.), so for keeping the sustainability related conversations going.

Thus, the first take away for organizations / corporations is:

1. Make an issue out of sustainability!

The discourse about sustainability is driven by communication *of* CSR (activities, projects and strategies) and communication *about* CSR and sustainability. These communication processes are happening on an intra- and interpersonal level, within organizations and beyond and in a wider public sphere, conceptualized as 'public discourse'. Making an issue out of sustainability includes information and messaging approaches as well as processes of sense making, where new interpretations of sustainable development are generated. How does that work? How can organizations and particularly corporations go beyond?

## Communication for transformation

Communication *for* sustainability and transformation is based on an understanding of communication as constitutive process and organizing element. To think beyond making an issue out of sustainability and the stabilization of related communication practices, a more critical and reflective perspective on communication is needed to **secure ongoing processes of communicating sustainability** and **thus 'organization' of sustainability related conversations**.

In chapter III.3, conversations were defined as the overarching sequence of organizing communication processes. Therefore, whenever we as individuals, in groups, or organizations themselves **communicate related to sustainability (as norm!)**, they create new meaning and potentially cultivate new norms like sustainability. This includes all three forms of CSR communication, communication or, about CSR and for sustainability. Then sustainability communication becomes a *performative process* and plays a crucial role for transformation – and the deep naturalization of sustainability as new societal norm.

Here, we need to differentiate between a *normalization of sustainability*, which is driven by a pragmatic, functional understanding of corporate or political communication where communication is used to have a certain effect and which is, as explained in this book, dominant in marketing or traditional business communication, and *cultivation of sustainability,* driven by a constructive and critical understanding of communication.

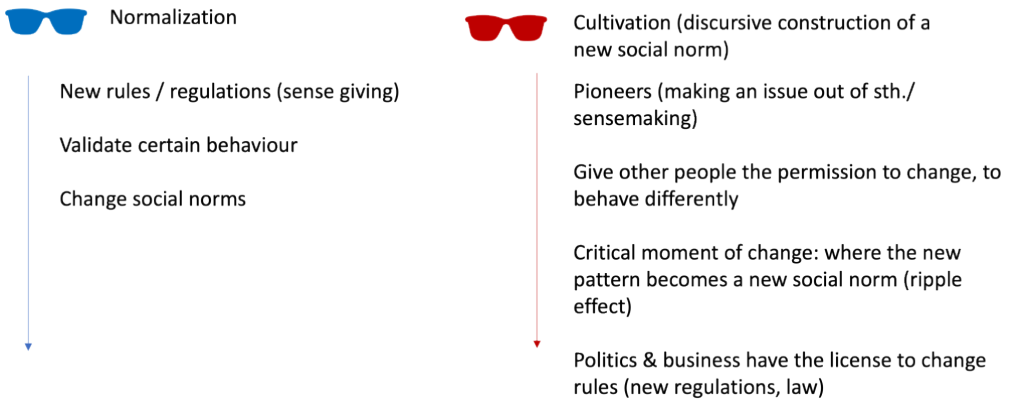


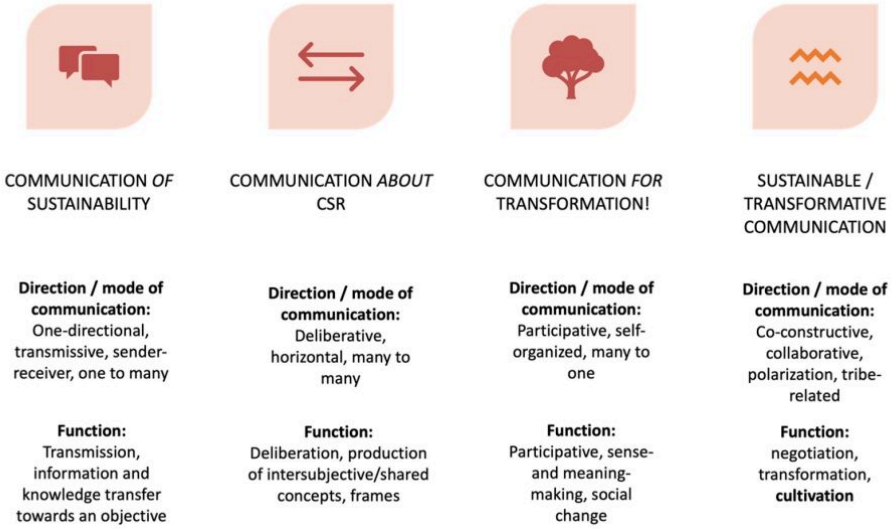

Image: "Blue sunglasses, red sunglasses" by Franzisca Weder

The SDGs, reporting indices (GRI) or political "deals" (like the Global Compact) and standardizations (like ISO-management standards) help organizations to validate their behavior and change their mission and guiding principles. However, a more radical perspective on communication as constitutive element goes beyond that. Sustainability communication also includes being a **pioneer**, doing things in a different way, and "sparking conversations".

Thus, the second take away for organizations / corporations is:

2. Spark and facilitate ongoing sustainability conversations.

This way organizations can create conversational spaces, where further sense- and meaning making becomes possible and the role of organizations in socio-ecological transformation processes becomes much more participatory, as shown in this overview:




Graphic: "Communication and sustainability" by Franzisca Weder

Corporations and international organizations in particular (business, but also intergovernment organisations, NGOs, research institutions, education institutions etc.) have the power and the tools to educate, to create awareness, to deliver and disseminate information. But the can also be a pioneer and nudger, to do things differently. One example is the new development to complement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with so called Inner Development Goals (IDGs). The 17 SDGs cover a wider range of issues that involve people, communities and groups with different needs but also very different cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs and convictions. They define a vision but progress along this vision has been limited and sometimes disappointing. One identified challenge is the lack of conversations to discover the inner capacity (individually and organizationally) to deal with the increasingly complex environment and a multiple crisis scenario. Abilities that are needed are defined by the 'Inner Development Goals' initiative.

The process of this initiative is co-creational and collaborative, it is potentially polarizing and culture- and tribe-related and grounds in negotiation processes and sustainable communication. The IDGs have not been set up and are now communicated and applied; instead the initiative says:

"As we are on our way to taking the research behind the framework and the toolkit truly global, we want to address geographical and cultural biases in the framework and invite you to both contribute and celebrate this endeavor" (IDG, n.d.).

With the IDGs a new dimension opens up which we could entitle 'sustainable' or 'transformative' communication, which also requires research in the areas of organizational culture, intercultural communication and social change.

We want to end this book with directing you to a free online course on sustainability communication and encouraging you to keep the conversation going – in whatever role you're in!

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