The Integration of CSR into Corporate Communication in Large European Companies

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of communication functions in organisations has been discussed for decades, focusing mainly on overlaps between marketing and public relations departments (e.g. Kotler and Mindak, 1978; Broom et al., 1991; Schultz, 1996; Wightman, 1999; Cornelissen and Lock, 2000; Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001). Integration in this context denotes the "cross-functional coordination enabling greater interaction across communication disciplines" (Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001, p. 415). The fragmentation of communication responsibilities has been found to result in counterproductive interdepartmental competition (Van Leuven, 1991; Gronstedt, 1996), which is why marketing and public relations departments have begun to work in a more integrated manner, linked to the decision-making level in the company (Schultz, 1996; Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001; Cornelissen, 2008). In the past decade, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has entered the communication arena, as stakeholder demands have led organisations to communicate their social stance in a more strategic manner in order to gain and maintain legitimacy (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005). Especially to large organisations, CSR has become a highly critical function for managing stakeholder relations, which has led to the institutionalisation of CSR (Bartlett et al., 2007). CSR has also been identified as an increasingly important driver of corporate strategy in large organisations (Accenture and UN Global Compact, 2010).

It has been argued that the management of corporate social responsibility shares similarities with public relations in that both developed from public information to reputation, and issues management during the late 20th century and both seek to enhance relationships with key stakeholder groups (Clark, 2000). On the other hand, however, it has been argued that businesses lose the opportunity to benefit from CSR, if they address CSR in public relations and media campaigns only, i.e. employ it cosmetically instead of strategically (Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Porter and Kramer, 2006; Vilanova et al., 2009). Therefore, it has been suggested that corporate communication managers should be labelled 'relationship managers' in view of the relationship building dimension of corporate communication (Likely, 2005).

The rise of CSR as an organisational function has brought with it new questions about the organisational arrangements of corporate communication and CSR, similar to the debate about marketing and public relations in the 1990s. However, to date there is limited empirical research on the integration of corporate communication and CSR in organisations. In the absence of empirical studies on the relationship between corporate communication and CSR, this paper studies the departmental arrangements between corporate communication and CSR, based on a survey among large European companies. It makes a

contribution to the corporate communication and CSR communication literature by providing empirical evidence of how the two functions are positioned vertically and whether they are integrated horizontally. The results of this paper provide an understanding of whether and how the integration of corporate communication and CSR takes place and gives insights into the closeness of this relationship. The paper thus makes an important contribution to the literature, which is hitherto mainly theoretical in nature and relatively scarce.

The paper is structured as follows: We first review the literature on the organisation of communication activities and of CSR activities, followed by a review of the literature on the organisational relationships between corporate communication and CSR. Second, we present the methodology behind the survey we conducted. Finally, we present our results and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focuses on the organisation of corporate communication and CSR in companies as well as on potential cross-overs between the two functions, as identified in the existing literature.

2.1 The Organisation of Communication Activities

Corporate communication "offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organisation is dependent" (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 5). As such, corporate communication is both a means to securing reputation and an organisational function. When addressed as a function, as it is in this paper, integration and strategic alignment are central themes. The issue of integration in the literature relates to how to align or harmonise external communication activities with each other (Cornelissen and Lock, 2001) as well as with those of internal communication (van Riel, 1995). Strategic alignment refers to whether a function or unit is organised as a strategic issue at the top management level (Kathuria et al., 2007; Galbreath, 2008). Organising communication can thus be seen as a question of "how to give form to the pursuit of coordination and integration in communication" (van Riel, 1995, p. 142). However, scholarly usage of the term 'integration' in relation to the organisation of communication is ambiguous and broad (Cornelissen, 2000). Integration applies, for example, to message consistency, media coordination and the convergence between activities, i.e. public relations, marketing communications, employee communications etc. In this study, integration is used to refer to the alignment of communication activities.

Functional integration of communication activities is closely linked to their departmental organisation (e.g. Holtzenhausen, 2002; Argenti, 2006; Vos and Westerhoudt, 2008). Prescriptive work in this area suggests how communication *should* be organised, resulting in recommendations, while descriptive work focuses on uncovering empirically how communication is organised (Cornelissen et al., 2006). Regardless of the approach, organisation relates both to "the departmental arrangement" of activities and to "the organisational relationship between departments" (Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001, p. 415). Existing research on the organisation of communication thus deals with, at least, two key aspects: firstly, the departmental integration of the numerous communication activities; and secondly, management in relation to how companies can and do organise their communication in order to facilitate and ensure vertical and horizontal integration of the activities in and between departments (Cornelissen et al., 2006). Vertical organisation refers to the ways in which activities are located within different departments as well as the positions of the departments within the organisational hierarchy. Horizontal integration, on the other hand, refers to the structures designed to integrate departmentally separated activities in a company (Cornelissen, 2008).

The organisation of communication activities is also connected to the question of whether such activities are to be centralised in a single department in order to ensure consistency or decentralised amongst multiple departments to allow for greater flexibility and adaptation (Argenti, 2006). Principally, there are three ways in which a company can choose to organise its communication activities on a centralisation-decentralisation continuum: the various activities can be merged into one or two central departments; they can stand alone as separate departments; or they can be subordinated to other functions (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 126). Higher levels of centralisation are said to require greater emphasis on horizontal integration (McPhee and Poole, 2001). In addition, scholars (e.g. McPhee, 1988; McPhee and Poole, 2001; Argenti, 2006; Balasen, 2008) suggest that both horizontal and vertical organisation – along with centralisation and decentralisation – depend upon company size. As the size increases, along with the number of activities, departments and employees, so does the need for formalised organisation.

Cornelissen (2008) lists three central recommendations typically found in the corporate communication literature. Firstly, "organizations should consolidate and centralize communication disciplines in a central department" (p. 122). Secondly, "organizations should locate the communicate department within the organizational hierarchy with easy access to decision-makers" (p. 123). And finally, "organizations need to implement cross-functional coordination mechanisms between the communication department and other departments across the organization" (p. 123). The first two recommendations thus address vertical integration in relation to a centralised communication department holding a key advisory role. The third recommendation, meanwhile, relates to horizontal integration highlighting the necessity of aligning interdepartmental communication activities. In connection to the practice of corporate communication, Cornelissen (2008) identifies an increase in the consolidation of communication activities. However, studies also reveal a preference towards separating the communication and marketing departments, suggesting the integration of activities into corporate affairs or public relations departments and marketing departments which cooperate closely and in a formalised manner (Cornelissen and Thorpe, 2001). In sum, communication activities are increasingly centralised and organised in a few, large departments, aligning these activities to the decision-making level in the company.

2.2 The Organisation of CSR Activities

CSR is viewed both as a means to establishing stakeholder relations and reputations and as an organisational function (Brønn, 2004; Cornelissen, 2008). This paper focuses on the latter as well as on its alignment with top management. Several single-country studies have been conducted that shed light on the organisational aspects of CSR. A survey conducted by the Danish Commerce and Companies Agency among 1,071 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Denmark show that the organisation of CSR is unsystematic (tnsGallup, 2005). A second study on Dutch SMEs and large companies also reveals that small firms make relatively little use of formal CSR instruments compared to large firms (Graafland et al., 2003). A third study on CSR practices in Finland shows how problems in relation to lack of information, structures, and management systems lead companies to manage CSR haphazardly, stressing the importance of organisational arrangements for CSR (Panapanaan et al., 2003). In another Dutch study, Cramer (2007) focuses on how companies can effectively organise CSR in international product chains, taking into account the particularities of their supply chain relationships. Finally, a survey carried out by the Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship (2009) also gives insights into the organisation of CSR within large North American companies. The study confirms that managing a company's role in society is becoming a formal part of corporate structure and management, as many companies are internalising CSR as a function of corporate departments and/or cross-departmental teams. The survey also reveals that departments dedicated to CSR are beginning to emerge. Studies thus point towards an increase in the formalisation of CSR, made visible by the centralisation of CSR activities in specialised departments.

2.3 Organisational Integration of Communication and CSR Activities

Although some scholars comment on the interplay between communication, public relations and marketing on the one hand and CSR on the other (e.g. Clark, 2000; Maignan and Ferrell, 2001; Cornelissen, 2008), the existing literature places little to no emphasis on the organisational relationships between communication and CSR activities. However, contrary to some views (e.g. Murray and Montanari, 1986; Lantos, 2002), Galbreath (2008) addresses the strategic importance of CSR, suggesting that it should be corporate executives who take the lead role in developing and integrating CSR in line with the firm's strategy rather than the marketing or public relations departments. Galbreath (2008), in other words, suggests a departmental separation rather than integration when it comes to CSR and communication.

One implication derived from the above review is that both communication and CSR activities increasingly are prioritised in organisations. The heightened organisational focus is mirrored in the consolidation of the respective activities and their placement in separate, centralised departments. Consequently, the review suggests decentralised approaches to the organisation of corporate communication and CSR with little horizontal integration. However, as CSR issues have grown in importance within corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2008) and communication is considered equally important for CSR (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), some form of horizontal integration between the departments seems desirable. Nevertheless, research has yet to be conducted in order to shed light on such issues. In order to remedy this gap in empirical research, our study explores the integration between communication and CSR functions in large European companies. On the basis of the above literature review, we pose the following research questions:

1) How are corporate communication and CSR activities organised in large European companies?
2) How is the cooperation between the two organised?
3) To what extent are communication and CSR activities aligned with the top management level?

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to shed light on corporate practices regarding the organisation of corporate communication and CSR as well as the cooperation between the two. An e-mail survey was conducted among the largest companies in European countries. All companies among the first 1,000 companies of the Forbes 2,000 (Forbes, 2007) headquartered in Western and Central Europe were selected, which produced a list of 302 companies. Even though this selection method meant that some countries were overrepresented (especially the United Kingdom and France), we still chose this method, because the main criterion for inclusion was size and not nationality.

As the total number of large companies in Europe is small, compared for example to the US, and the response rate can be expected to be low due to company policies, this study did not seek to produce results that are representative of all large companies in Europe. Rather, the results are an approximation, setting the stage for future, more in-depth studies that can make use of the variables and relationships among them explored in this study.

A questionnaire was developed, which focused on the organisation of corporate communication activities, the organisation of CSR activities, and the cooperation between the two. First, the companies were asked what the department that handles corporate communication is called, who the head of this department reports to, and which board member has responsibilities for corporate communication. Further, the companies were asked to rate the importance of communication for their corporate success on a 5-point scale. The same questions were also asked in regards to CSR. We then examined to what extent the departments handling corporate communication work autonomously in the companies or cooperate with other departments in carrying out their activities. To this end, we identified nine typical corporate

communication activities (see Figure 1) (Argenti, 2006; Piwinger and Zerfass, 2007) and measured the level of interdepartmental cooperation for these activities on a 5-point scale, ranging from "doing all the work" to "doing nothing". Companies also had the possibility to check 'Not applicable', if they do not carry out a particular activity in their organisations. Ultimately, the companies were asked to indicate the frequency of cooperation between corporate communication and CSR, the tasks for which they cooperate, and the degree of formalisation of the cooperation between the two, which was measured on a 5-point scale using the items verbalisation, writing, operating procedures, and formal communication channels developed by Cornelissen and Lock (2000).

Research assistants rang up each company's communication department and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. If so, they then asked for an e-mail address to which they could send the questionnaire. The questionnaires were returned by e-mail or surface mail. Of the 50 questionnaires returned, 49 were usable. The sample includes companies from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. No questionnaires were returned from the Netherlands and Finland.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Corporate Communication Organisation and Activities

The results show that all of the companies in the sample have communication departments of some kind. Overall, 78% of companies call these departments just Communication[1], while 8% call it Communication and Marketing, and another 8% Communication and Branding. The remaining companies add Public Relations, Reputation, or Strategy to the previously mentioned department names. The only department that does not have 'Communication' in its name is called 'Corporate and Governmental Affairs, Brand'. When asked about how important corporate communication is to the success of the company, which was measured on a 5-point scale, most frequently companies indicated that corporate communication is extremely important (63%). The average was 4.6 (SD = 0.5).

The person to whom the head of the corporate communication department reports is first and foremost the CEO (75%). In the remaining companies, they report to the executive vice president, or board members responsible for Corporate Affairs/Relations, Human Resources, Communication & Human Resources, Communication, Marketing & Communications, Communication & Investor Relations, and Corporate Reporting. Another question asked was which board member has ultimate responsibility for communication activities. For 82% of the companies, the CEO/chairman has this responsibility. The other answers were given between one and three times and include board members whose responsibility is: Corporate Relations/Affairs, Communication, Finance, or Human Resources and Organisational Development. There was also one company, in which all board members shared this responsibility. The result suggests that there is a direct link between the corporate communication department and the decision-making level in the companies surveyed.

As for the activities they carry out, most commonly, corporate communication departments have full responsibility for media relations and the corporate website, as can be seen from Figure 1. More than half of them are strongly involved in branding and corporate design. Communication departments are only to a lesser extent involved in annual reports, CSR reports. Advertising and sponsorship are areas where communication departments contribute, but typically do not do all the work.

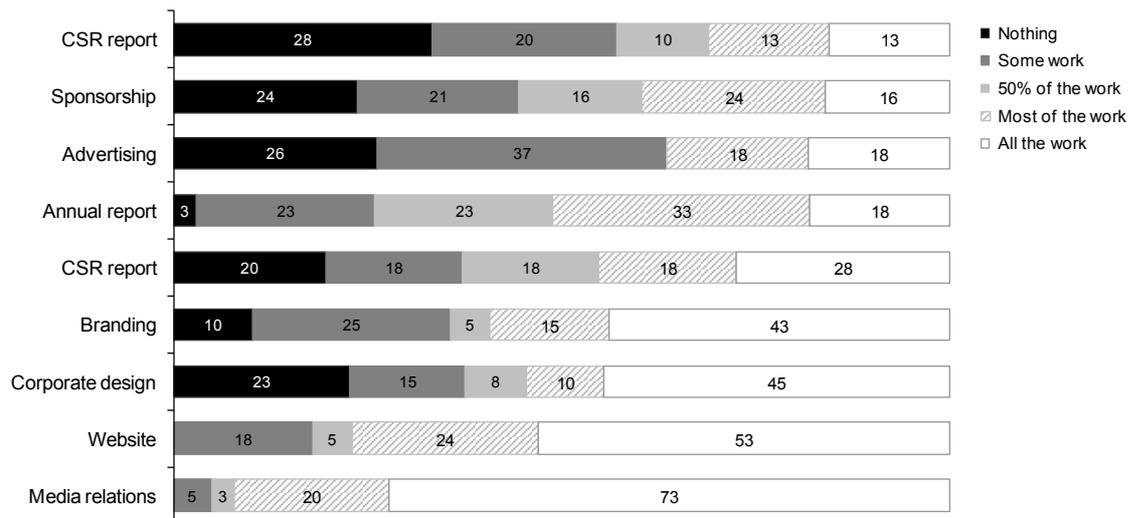[1] This also includes 'Communications', 'Corporate Communication(s)', and Group Communication(s)

Figure 1: Contribution of Communication Departments to Particular Activities (in %)

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the corporate communication activities to measure how strongly the corporate communication activities correlate with the sum of the remaining activities. If alpha values exceed 0.7, the items can be grouped together as one latent variable (Nunally and Bernstein, 1994). Cronbach's alpha was 0.86 for the nine corporate communication activities, which means that the replies companies have given to each of the corporate communication activities are similar enough, so that the nine corporate communication activities can be merged into one variable indicating interdepartmental cooperation for corporate communication activities. This result suggests that companies tend to have the same level of inter-departmental cooperation for all the corporate communication activities tested. Thus, they tend to cooperate either a lot for all this tasks or very little. The average of the interdepartmental collaboration for all communication activities together was 3.4 (SD = 1.5) on a 5-point scale.

4.2 The Organisation of CSR

Only about half of the companies (53%) have CSR departments. These departments are not necessarily called 'CSR', but carry a variety of names, including sustainable development, sustainability, environmental affairs, social compliance, public affairs or combinations thereof. In 15% of the companies, the communication department takes care of CSR. In another 15%, CSR responsibilities are split between at least two departments, including communication, HR, reputation management, logistics, or marketing. The remaining companies either assigned CSR responsibilities to general management, HR departments, and investor relations departments, or have not indicated where their CSR responsibilities are located in the company. When asked about the importance of CSR activities for the corporate success, which was measured on a 5-point scale, companies stated most frequently (50%) that it was important rather than extremely important. The average was 4.0 (SD = 0.7).

Most frequently, the head of CSR reports to a Chief Communication/Reputation officer or the Vice President Communication (31%), followed by the CEO/President/Chairman (29%). Other reporting relationships, which were found between 1 and 3 times, include: Director Corporate Affairs, Executive Vice

President, Secretary General, Vice President Corporate Relations, CFO, Head of Human Resources, Vice President Supply Operations and Engineering, Head of Sustainability, or a Board Committee. Most commonly, the CEO/President/Chairman was responsible for CSR (53%). Other arrangements, which were found between one and three times, include a board committee, the Vice President Supply Operations and Engineering, Director Corporate Affairs, CFO, HR/Legal Affairs/Sustainability, International Affairs, or all board members together. According to these results, CSR seems to be addressed as a strategic issue in the majority of the participating companies.

4.3 Relationships between Corporate Communication and CSR

When comparing the departmental arrangements for corporate communication and CSR, it turns out that slightly more than half of the companies (53%) have both a communication and a CSR department of some kind, while in 15% of the companies, the communication department takes care of both. The other companies have other arrangements for CSR. In a quarter of the companies, the head of the communication department and the head of CSR report to the same person, who is either the CEO/President/Chairman or the Director Corporate Affairs/Relations or the Executive Vice President. In 43% of the companies, the same board member is responsible for corporate communication and CSR, which is mostly the CEO/President/Chairman, but once also the Director Corporate Affairs, and once all board members together.

The frequency of the collaboration between corporate communication departments and departments taking care of CSR was measured on a four-point scale, including 'never', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'daily'. The average frequency was 3.2 (SD = 0.6), which means that the two cooperate very frequently in the majority of companies, in one third of the companies even on a daily basis. When asked about the tasks for which corporate communication and CSR cooperate in the form of an open-ended question, the companies returned the following answers:

- HR-related issues
- CSR/sustainability reports
- CSR policy
- Media relations, publicity
- Events and CSR initiatives
- Internal communication
- Sustainability website
- Company profile
- Internal training programs
- Defensive work
- Product recalls
- Goal setting
- Investment and sponsoring issues
- Reporting to board

Ultimately, the formalisation of this cooperation was measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'not at all' to 'very large extent'. The four items together with their means and SD were as follows: whether this cooperation is verbalised (3.7, SD = 1.1), is written down (2.6, SD = 1.3), is laid down in procedures (3.0, SD = 1.3), and is manifested in formal communication channels (3.5, SD=1.2). The results show that the cooperation between CSR and corporate communication is formalised to some extent. Cronbach's alpha for

the four items measuring formalisation was 0.83, which means that they are strongly interrelated and, together, represent on measure of the level of formalisation.

The correlation between the frequency of collaboration between corporate communication and CSR and the level of formalisation of this relationship is 0.79 (*p<0.001*), which clearly indicates that the level of formalisation for the collaboration between corporate communication and CSR is higher when the two cooperate more frequently.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study shows that all companies surveyed have communication departments of some kind. Most commonly they handle media relations and take care of the corporate website. More than half are strongly involved in branding, but fewer than half in advertising. The study thus confirms the trend observed by Cornelissen and Thorpe (2001) that there is a preference for separating communication and marketing. Horizontally, the communication departments engage in interdepartmental collaboration, as the level of collaboration for the nine communication activities has shown. An interesting finding is that the levels of interdepartmental collaboration for these activities are strongly correlated, which means that companies collaborate either frequently or infrequently for all these activities.

Only about half of the companies have CSR departments. CSR is managed most frequently by these CSR departments, but also by communication departments to a small extent. A few companies have split CSR responsibilities among several departments or have assigned this responsibility to other departments. The communication departments frequently engage in cooperation with the CSR departments. The more frequently the two cooperate, the more likely they are to have formalised their cooperation. The results further suggest that more communication officers report directly to the CEO than CSR officers do, while one third of all CSR managers report to the communication director and fewer to the CEO. The board member that has communication responsibility was most frequently the CEO for both communication and CSR, yet more frequently for communication than for CSR. Board members responsible solely for communication or CSR are rare. Overall, the results thus suggest that companies have neither closely integrated corporate communication into CSR nor CSR into corporate communication. In those companies where communication and CSR are taken care of by the same department, this department was a communication department. In other companies, CSR managers report to communication directors. Thus, if at all, CSR is integrated into communication, but not vice versa.

As regards our research question whether communication and CSR are aligned with the top management level we conclude that there are two forms of strategic alignment: either a direct form, where the communication or CSR managers refer directly to the decision-making level or the CEO, or an indirect form, where the communication or CSR managers refer indirectly to the decision-making level or the CEO. Overall, we thus conclude that the corporate communication department is generally aligned with the top management level, whereas this is not always the case for the CSR department.

The purpose of the paper has been to shed light on the strategic alignment and departmental arrangements between corporate communication and CSR in large European companies. While existing academic literature has pointed to the similarities between and possible integration of corporate communication and CSR, there are practically no empirical findings about the departmental integration of corporate communication and CSR in organisations. Although the sample size is a clear limitation regarding the generalizability of the results, the paper nevertheless makes a contribution by offering insights relevant to both academics and practitioners particularly in a European context. Our analysis and findings are primarily relevant in a European context, since previous studies (e.g. Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Habisch et al., 2005) have identified significant cross-cultural differences between CSR practices in Europe and the US. These can be put down to different types of regulations regarding CSR issues, which result in implicit and

explicit practices (Matten and Moon, 2008). The results provide researchers and practitioners with a better understanding of the different ways in which CSR is currently integrated into corporate communication. Such evidence is also crucial for the design of future academic research in this area, for example when studying organisations within particular industries or countries. In the absence of previous research, this study was designed as descriptive and exploratory in nature and therefore cannot be used to make recommendations on the effectiveness of particular configurations. Consequently, qualitative case-based research would be needed to understand the effectiveness as well as the connection between a company's culture and vision on the one hand and its choice of integration between corporate communication and CSR on the other.

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