

CSR Communication in the Digital Age: A Case Study of the Bank of Cyprus

Nicholas Nicoli
University of Nicosia, Cyprus

Marcos Komodromos
University of Nicosia, Cyprus

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to explore, describe, and offer new directions on corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication in the digital age. CSR communication is in a state of flux as organizations adapt to technological transformations and new communication approaches conducive to the digital age. The chapter draws on current strategic communication trends and CSR communication literature to underline new theoretical and practical implications. The chapter explicates the relationship between CSR, strategic communication, and more recent forms of CSR communication via digital platforms. The Bank of Cyprus is considered as a case study to illustrate how one largely structured organization applies current approaches of CSR communication.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread growth of digital communication technologies has given organisations opportunities to communicate with their publics under a new communications paradigm known as strategic communication (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Such technologies enable organisations to build strategies, deliver content directly and establish meaningful relationships in a more holistic manner (Zerfass *et al.*, 2016). CSR communication has grown significantly as a vital component of strategic communication and is thus required to keep pace with the paradigm shift occurring in communication.

For a communication practitioner the dissemination of a CSR programme is as important as its benefits to society (Carrol, 2011; Chaudri, 2017). There are many reasons for this. Possibly the most important is that CSR communication is expected to have positive effects on the organisation's consumer, client and stakeholder attitudes (Berens, *et al.*, 2007). Yet several studies indicate that consumers, clients and stakeholders often express cynicism toward companies that communicate their CSR activities, particularly when traditional approaches are used in a generic manner (Zerfass *et al.*, 2016). It is also the case that CSR communication has industry-specific idiosyncrasies (Gruber *et al.*, 2015); what works for one organisation might not for another. It is imperative therefore that CSR communication adapts with advancements in technologies and is modified to the characteristics of the organisation and the industry in which it is a part of.

The purpose of this chapter is, through a review of strategic communication in the digital age, to explore new approaches toward CSR communication. The chapter conceptualizes CSR communication within a holistic communication strategy. *The Bank of Cyprus* is used as a case study in order to illustrate current approaches of CSR communication. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first addresses the changing strategic communication landscape. In this section the progression of digitalisation and its impact on society is examined before reviewing the latest developments in strategic communication. The second section draws on current literature on the burgeoning field of CSR communication. The chapter's final section sheds light on CSR communication in the digital age via a case study on Cyprus' largest bank, *The Bank of Cyprus*; this section is divided into a short description of the bank's recent activities and recurring CSR initiatives. Thereafter the case study analyses the bank's CSR communication approaches. These are divided into channels controlled by the bank and channels out of its control.

THE CHANGING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS LANDSCAPE

Digitalisation and Communication

The twentieth-century's modernization process created a setting whereby organisations communicated to passive, albeit large, homogenous audiences. Communication disciplines such as marketing and public relations separately prevailed only because of the pervasiveness and the limited potential of analogue mass media (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). Essentially, practitioners used communication approaches that inhibited audiences to two options, to either accept or reject the content through linear media.

Today's heterogeneous, fragmented audiences rely on highly interactive and complex digital devices. Mobile telephones for example are also books, music pods, newspapers, radios and increasingly, television sets. Yet drawing comparisons with older media does not fully illustrate the advancements of today's communication technologies. Contemporary digitalisation is identified with deep disruptive traits in how individuals consume media and importantly, creates a participatory ability that allows users to be a part of the media landscape as content creators. As individuals begin to generate their own content the dynamics of existing social structures change (Schmidt & Cohen, 2013). Journalism for example loses its social standing as more people take on the role of citizen journalist. Digital communication technologies furthermore, have made users more inclined to actively seek out content from multiple platforms. This creates an interesting narrative between senders and receivers as they exchange information and

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