Are CSR and Sustainability a ‘First World Problem’? Western and Eastern European Perspectives

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Abstract

CSR and sustainability are evolving concepts that need to be understood over time and in the context of events and conditions. They are fuzzily defined, they overlap and they are often (mis)understood synonymously. One of the authors understands them hierarchically, with sustainability as a subcategory of CSR. The other understands them as complementary, with CSR providing a narrow organisational perspective, and sustainability providing a broader systemic – planetary – perspective. In framing CSR and sustainability as First World problems, we recognise that we limit the perspective and stay within established boundaries of business models and corporate sustainability. At the same time, we propose to reframe the problem toward next generation solutions which no longer regard commercial success as the first priority. With regard to our initial research findings from interviews in Germany, the UK, Bulgaria and Romania, we conclude that the First World perspective is inadequate to describe the problem and possible solutions. Instead, we propose that sustainability communication become a strategic tool to reframe the question and thus open up new paths for innovative solutions.
1 Introduction

In *Social Acceleration*, his 2013 book on the challenges of modernity, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa identified depression as the “pathology of late modernity” (Rosa 2013, p. 217). As all aspects of our lives appear to be speeding up, psychological ailments seem to be a direct consequence. This manifests itself increasingly in the context of climate change, for society at large (Manning and Clayton 2018), and in particular for children (Majeed and Lee 2017).

2019 was a year of expanding and accelerating climate change awareness and anxiety: Greta Thunberg became a household name, and school kids around the world followed her example of a *skolstrejk för klimatet* (“school strike for the climate”). The UK-based Extinction Rebellion (XR) protest movement achieved global public awareness (Gardner et al. 2020), and David Wallace Wells published *The Uninhabitable Earth*, a dystopian analysis of, and conclusion from, recent climate science, which opens with the words “It is worse, much worse, than you think” (Wallace-Wells 2019, p. 1). These developments indicate a step change in public awareness and communication.

Until recently, in the academic discourse around CSR and sustainability, the concession of CSR failures (CSR 1.0) was followed by an optimistic outlook to a more inclusive business model: CSR 2.0, as per Visser (2016). In another recent assessment of shortfalls of prevailing business sustainability concepts, Dyllick and Muff (2016) point to the “big disconnect between micro-level progress and macro-level deterioration” (p. 156), which they suggest should be addressed through efforts to “change the rules of the game” (p. 167).

Now it seems like the horizon of possibilities is widening and we start imagining the previously unimaginable. Perhaps it is the game itself that needs to change? Melissen and Moratis (2016) advocate as much in their call for Fourth Generation Sustainable Business Models. Such questions have an obvious bearing on the research discussed here, which looks at the concepts of CSR and sustainability, their understanding and implementation in university education and corporate practice, in Germany, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria and Romania. We have chosen Germany and the UK as established Western European democracies, and Bulgaria and Romania as new South Eastern European democracies to allow a direct comparison between economically and culturally different (yet still European) countries.

Both in Bulgaria, and in Romania, CSR was introduced after the end of the Cold War, “in the early years of socioeconomic transition by international organisations … as well as subsidiaries of multinational companies operating in the country” (Simeonov and Stefanova 2015, p. 313). Recent analyses of the state of
CSR play in both countries have found that “CSR in Bulgaria is in its adolescent years” (Simeonov and Stefanova 2015, p. 329), whereas in Romania, companies “continue to base CSR activities on punctual sponsorships and charitable projects” (Sitnikov 2015, p. 393).

Through in-depth and structured interviews with academics and practitioners in the areas of sustainability and CSR, we analyse whether and how the evolution of CSR towards sustainability is noticeably different between ‘old’ and ‘new’ liberal capitalist democracies. We also look at differences and similarities in the role of communication.

Are CSR and sustainability mainly seen as ‘first world problems’, or is it time to pose the question altogether differently – away from first and other world perspectives which are primarily business profit and growth focused, and toward a moral perspective that follows Gro Harlem Brundtland’s beautifully simple and succinct definition in the preface of the 1987 report *Our Common Future*:

> “Sustainable development meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (facsimilie of handwritten note reprinted in Keiner 2006, p. 2).

The following two sections discuss first how the concepts of CSR and sustainability continue to evolve toward required transformational, radical change (Elkington 2018), and then second, what role sustainability communication (SC) might play in driving such change. This is followed by the discussion of findings from in-depth interviews, in relation to the evolution of CSR, sustainability and SC. The First World problem perspective will be discussed as a CSR 1.0 (Visser 2016) and business sustainability problem (BST 1.0/2.0, as per Dyllick and Muff 2016). In conclusion, we suggest a reframing of questions toward a game-changing perspective of *True Business Sustainability* (Melissen and Moratis 2016; Moratis and Melissen 2020). This will also form the basis for the next stage of broader, deeper research.

2 The Evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability in Theory and Practice

CSR and sustainability are often used interchangeably. Definitions are varied and vague, the concepts are complex and authors, even before ourselves, have pointed to the contradiction in terms, with firms incapable of social responsibility, and global sustainability incompatible with economic progress (Moon 2007).
There is no common agreement on terms, and even the authors of this chapter differ in their views: Adi sees CSR as the umbrella category, including concepts such as social justice and human rights, and (environmental) sustainability as a subcategory. For Stoeckle, CSR is the narrow or micro perspective, referring primarily to the interests of the corporation or organisation, whereas sustainability in broad or macro perspective refers to the interests of an organisation’s or corporation’s environment, be that society, an ecosystem, or the planet as a whole. In a process of ‘constructive divergence’, the two narrative positions exist side by side.

As topics in the public eye, both CSR and sustainability wax and wane, relative to media attention triggered by newsworthy events. We will discuss the role of sustainability communication in this process later in this chapter.

The evolution of the concept of CSR has given us a broad variety of definitions “and the discourse within the CSR domain about the conceptual interpretation of the term remains vivid” (Moratis 2016, p. 26). Classic CSR models are built on the commercial self-interest of a firm as their main motivation. This business performance focus is what we describe as the narrow or micro perspective of CSR, from Carroll’s historic perspective (Carroll 1979, 2008) to the Triple Bottom Line and Creating Shared Value.

We broadly agree with Visser’s conclusion “that CSR, as a business, governance and ethics system, has failed. … while at the micro level – in terms of specific CSR projects and practices – we can show many improvements, at the macro level almost every indicator of our social, environmental and ethical health is in decline” (Visser 2016, p. 339). His concept of a CSR 2.0 is a step in a better direction, moving the practice from its previous progressive stages of defensive, charitable, promotional, strategic and systemic CSR 1.0 towards an advanced stage of corporate sustainability and responsibility (p. 361). This is what Dyllick and Muff describe as True Business Sustainability (BST 3.0), reconnecting the

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1 For comprehensive histories of the field and discussions of various concepts and definitions, see (Carroll, 2008; Dahlsrud, 2008; Matten and Moon 2008; Rahman 2011) and more recently (Adi 2017; Agudelo et al. 2019; Wu et al. 2020).

2 From the Three-Dimensional Model of Corporate Performance (Carroll, 1979) to the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997), to 3C-SR (Meehan et al. 2006) and Creating Shared Value (Porter and Kramer 2011), there is rich vein of models promising corporate success through CSR focus. In particular CSV has been criticised as a “one-trick pony approach embodied in overly narrow economic perspectives” (Beschorner, 2013, p. 112) and continues to attract critical reflection for its allegedly narrow understanding of CSR as philanthropy, and its overpromising on reinventing capitalism whilst retaining the idea of profit maximisation (Beschorner and Hajduk 2017; Crane et al. 2014; Wieland 2017).
micro perspective of the organisation with the macro perspective of its environment through a “shift in organizational perspective, from inside-out to outside-in, [to] allow a company to develop the strategies and the business models needed to make relevant contributions to overcome societal and planetary challenges, thereby contributing to the common good” (Dyllick and Muff 2016, p. 168).

Moratis and Melissen propose a more radical turn in a recent contribution (partly written as a reaction to Dyllick and Muff). Changing the rules of the game is no longer enough. In discussing a new social contract between business and society, they conclude that the orthodoxy of a transactional market logic will not yield the required outcomes, and that “it may be more suitable from a BST 3.0 perspective to change the game altogether” (Moratis and Melissen 2020, p. 233).

Talk about changing the rules of the game, or changing the game altogether implies common agreement on rules, or standards. However, the prevailing confusion over standards constitutes a main hurdle on the path to true sustainability (Visser 2016). Measuring and reporting the non-financial alongside the financial, the intangible alongside the tangible assets of a corporation has always been a formidable challenge for businesses. At the same time, it is a necessity for truly sustainable business practice. In 2010, the International Integrated Reporting Council (IIRC) was founded with the remit to establish a global framework for sustainability accounting. It identified six “capitals” (human, natural and social, as well as financial, manufactured and intellectual) on which the organization and society depend for prosperity; and reflects and communicates the interdependence between the success of the organization and the value it creates for investors, employees, customers and, more broadly, society (Flower 2015, p. 3).

Flower is a notable critic of the IIRC, and describes its story as one of ‘regulatory capture’ and, ultimately, A Story of Failure (Flower 2015). The academic argument in Critical Perspectives on Accounting between Flower and Adams (2015) illustrates the tension between the good intention of combining business value

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3This is reflected in media commentary on the coronavirus crisis: On 3rd April 2020, an editorial in the Financial Times discussed how the Virus lays bare the frailty of the social contract. The suggestions are expansive: “Radical reforms – reversing the prevailing policy direction of the last four decades – will need to be put on the table.” (https://www.ft.com/content/7eff769a-74dd-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca).

4It should be stated that the idea remains abstract, at least for the time being. No clear example is provided as to what this new game might be – other than the suggestion that “BST 3.0 firms should be willing and able to play their part in creating that [new] story,” (p.236).
with social value, and the perhaps unintended consequence of continually following commercial accountancy principles. Again, CSR and sustainability remain stuck in an outdated paradigm of purely economic dimensions.

The introduction of ISO 26,000 marks something of a paradigm shift in that context. Moratis (2016) states that “the standard hardly makes reference to market, financial or strategic benefits for firms resulting from an integral triple bottom line approach and the recently emerged shared value concept” (p. 40). Instead, he points to the standard’s moral weight, an “illustration of the concurrent development of CSR definitions that is taking place in which moral views, instrumental views and mixed views co-evolve and compete for dominance” (p. 42). As this ‘competition for dominance’ will play out in the public arena, communication will play a central role.

3 Sustainability Communication (SC) and Transformational Change

The speed and unpredictability of current events can lead to perspectives and conclusions becoming outdated or redundant very quickly. In a world of shortening news cycles and never-ending information flows characterised by Radical Uncertainty (Kay and King 2020), flexibility and nimbleness become core assets. On the other hand, it also invites more daring predictions, to imagine the unimaginable. In the case of SC, this could mean moving from communication about sustainability – the discourse-oriented approach to raise topic awareness – and of sustainability – the sender-oriented approach to transmit information and generate interest – toward communication for sustainability with the clear intent to change outcomes, to “facilitate societal transformation towards the normative goals of sustainable development.” (Fischer et al. 2016, p. 144). For the role of public relations, it also means an elevation of activist PR as a driver of such transformations, with dissent (words) and protest (deeds) as its two prongs (Adi 2019, p. 9).

 Kay and King use the analogy of the hedgehog and the fox: “…first made by the Greek poet Archilochus, developed by Tolstoy and subsequently popularised by Isaiah Berlin … The hedgehog knows one big thing, the fox many little things. … The hedgehog approaches most uncertainties with strong priors; the fox attempts to assemble evidence before forming a view of ‘what is going on here’.” (Kay & King, 2020, p. 222) Advanced (if not radical) concepts of sustainability and sustainability communication will aim to emulate the fox, rather than the hedgehog.
This aligns with Moratis and Melissen’s concept of “naive, native and narrative intelligence” (Moratis and Melissen 2020, p. 235): the naivety to embrace risks and try new approaches (like the eponymous fox); the nativity to understand human behaviour and motivations (Griskevicius et al. 2012); and finally, the narrative intelligence to co-create not just shared value but shared meaning:

“When one concludes from the ‘big disconnect’ that sustainability and the relationship between business and society need a new story, BST 3.0 firms should be willing and able to play their part in creating that story.” (Moratis and Melissen 2020, p. 236).

This carries new and additional challenges and opportunities for SC. There is the post-truth challenge undermining the validity of scientific claims (Jaques et al. 2019), which is exacerbated by partisan political perspectives in particular in the US, where the belief in anthropogenic climate change is divided along party lines (Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Van Boven et al. 2018).6

The flip side to this lamentable state of public discourse is an opportunity for SC to bridge divides by understanding and appropriately addressing an audience’s psychological characteristics (Druckman and McGrath 2019) through the strategic use of textual and visual frames to reduce the effect of science politicisation (Bolsen et al. 2019). The previously discussed concept of naïve, native and narrative intelligence matches this concept. Under conditions where previously unimaginable options and solutions suddenly become imaginable, the potential shifts from CSR 1.0 to 2.0 (Visser 2016), from BST 1.0/2.0 to 3.0 (Dyllick and Muff 2016) and towards fourth generation sustainable business models (Melissen and Moratis 2016) become more tangible. The following part of this chapter explores this question based on the results from our interviews.

4 The Current Study

Whilst research into corporate social responsibility practices and reporting – including its relationship with the communication function – has broadly increased in recent years, this remains largely focused on Western democratic countries (Horvath et al. 2017). Werther and Chandler argue that for countries that are less

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6This is often framed as a new phenomenon in our post 2016, post truth, fake news world. However, climate scepticism and denialism are positions that have been supported by strategic communication efforts for decades, as chronicled in Merchants of Doubt (Oreskes and Conway 2010).
developed, a CSR focus would be overshadowed by an immediate concern with economic survival (Werther and Chandler 2014). That is echoed by Simeonov and Stefanova regarding Bulgaria’s approach to CSR from the 1990s (Simeonov and Stefanova 2015, p. 316).

As a ‘nice to have’, a CSR and/or sustainability focus is based on affordability, which explains its “Western conceptual and operational dominance” (Visser 2016, p. 351) – what we call a First World problem. At the same time, this framing of the First World problem implies a somewhat outdated paradigm which understands CSR and sustainability questions merely in the language of business, expressed in economic terms. It is the narrow inside-out perspective of the firm, which will always fail to do justice to systemic sustainability problems. Instead, “an outside-in perspective may be the crucial step needed for business to move to full-fledged or true sustainability” (Dyllick and Muff 2016, p. 162). We will explore whether such a position can be identified in any of our respondents.

In line with the inside-out model, Campbell formulates eight propositions underpinning CSR uptake, which are all reactive in nature. They include weak financial performance, too much or too little competition, strong consensual stage regulations, stakeholder oversight, institutional reward of good behaviour, responsible trade associations, and institutionalised dialogue with stakeholders. CSR, then, is not a business driver, but a necessity under certain conditions (Campbell 2007).

This raises a number of questions, including the organizational responsibility for implementing and communicating CSR activities. In the case of multinational organizations entering new markets, should they ‘import’ their CSR principles, or should they go with the flow of local practices? Is there an appetite, an opportunity even, to change the rules of the game, or to attempt to change the game altogether?

Our research addresses these questions, as well as the gap in research, by comparing the state of CSR and sustainability practice and communication in Germany and in the UK with the two South Eastern European countries of Bulgaria and Romania. This allows us to explore differences and similarities with regard to topic awareness and education, and also the role and function of strategic sustainability communication in those countries. It will form the basis for a multidisciplinary research project that will explore these points systematically, in more depth.

While the original research includes 11 questions in total, this chapter will only report the responses to the four relevant to the topic of this chapter:

- How (if at all) does your organisation distinguish between CSR and Sustainability (Q1)
Findings

Q1: CSR and Sustainability – Agreement on Greater Society Good but not Much Else

Formulated as “How (if at all) do you distinguish between CSR and Sustainability”, the question yielded responses where participants attempted to define each,
separately. At face value, responses do present commonalities regarding mentions of common good, ethical practices and consideration of impact on future generations as stakeholders, but the similarities stop there.

A tendency is noted, on the one hand, to associate CSR with reputation building exercises including applications such as philanthropy or support of social causes. Various theoretical approaches are reflected in these definitions including the license to operate (first conceptually introduced by (Joyce and Thomson 2000) and Carroll’s pyramid of responsibilities, first introduced in 1991).

I think that CSR is more specifically linked to the license to operate of the business. So it’s an organisation’s responsibility to the world around them and to the society which allows them to operate freely. Case in point, BP was targeted by Greenpeace, therefore challenging their license to operate. This then begs the question – is CSR the actual actions of the business or the stakeholder perceived and accepted actions of the business? I’m still wondering about that question. (UK academic)

Sustainability, on the other hand, is linked to a “business model” (Dyllick and Muff’s BST 1.0). Speaking of sustainability as a business model, there are differences in understanding, too – for Western practitioners, especially German ones, this is associated with environmental sustainability and reporting frameworks, while the respondents from other countries tend to focus more on the beneficiaries of sustainable practices, in this case future generations and the planet.

In my view the main difference is that sustainability asks for a stringent business model, i.e. is our business model intrinsically viable/feasible in the long run including all stakeholder aspects that need to be taken into consideration. (German practitioner, banking sector)

Sustainability should refer to a business model that meets the needs of the present development without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. At the same time, it is a model that primarily looks at the impact the business has, not only on the economy but also on the society and on the environment. Sustainability is about the capacity of the business in itself to be sustainable in the future and its relationship with the society and environment in which it operates or gets resources from (Bulgarian practitioner, publishing).

Additionally, where sustainability is related to the environment, several practitioners make the distinction between the mere act of “communicating green” and “acting green” (see UK, Bulgarian and Romanian answers).

What’s interesting to notice is the variety of associations: while for the British academic in the study, CSR is related to the License to Operate, it is sustainability that is linked to the Triple Bottom Line reporting framework by one of the
German respondents. What is also notable is that older theoretical concepts and models dominate the participants’ vocabulary, indicating potentially both comfort with established terms and lack of awareness of the newer ones. This points to opportunities for education as well as strategic SC.

**Q3: CSR and Sustainability Implementation – Promotion and Communication vs Business and Marketing**

The discrepancy noted in how participants defined CSR and sustainability, aligning one with communication and the other with business, continues in the answers to the question aiming to identify how the two concepts are implemented. Most respondents assign CSR to the communication department and make reference to reporting of compliance with existing rules and regulations, while sustainability is more often associated with business and sometimes marketing.

CSR is primarily run out of communication spheres or are handled more centrally in the corporate foundations. Sustainability is embedded in marketing structures and thereby more relatable to business targets. (German practitioner, pharma sector).

CR and Sustainability are interchangeable – about governance structure, reporting to the board. Performance reporting and communication about value to customers and society. Working groups (diversity, environment etc.), functional responsibility. Advocacy – international networks, UN Global Compact, SDG resource centre. Recruitment: employee lifecycle: focus on CR as a lever. (UK practitioner, publishing)

It is interesting to note the German academic pointing to the fact that CSR is “business driven” thus absent from the university structures while they do have “sustainability officer”.

At university, we have an officer for sustainability and need to adhere the rules of the state. CSR is not implemented in our framework because it is mostly business-driven. (German academic)

Equally interesting is one Bulgarian practitioner’s answer where the individuals themselves take initiative to solve what they perceive as social problems in areas where neither the state nor their organization is offering support. These grassroots activities will be critical in a country where government and civil society are still largely passive toward CSR, and business only slowly become drivers of CSR activities (Simeonov and Stefanova 2015, p. 321).

We do a lot of environmental work, both educational and actual cleaning initiatives like cleaning beaches, forests. It’s more of unofficial initiatives rather that corporate
– for example, organising colleagues, friends and partners to go together and clean a place. It’s a volunteering work (…) (Bulgarian practitioner, publishing).

The weak governmental support is also noted by one of the Romanian practitioners. Unlike the Bulgarian however, the Romanian practitioner presents a collaborative situation where the organization and its stakeholders work together towards the UN SDGs.

There is a governmental body in Romania called the Department for Sustainable Development. It really strives to align the objectives of the government with the 17 UN SDGs. However, it has little power and importance in the eyes of the Government. We have actually a whole movement in the company and it (is) led by a department that is called CSR. However, what we really strive to do is work towards sustainability. The name is obsolete, however we look closely at what we do in our operation and how can we reduce negative impact. We also invest significant amounts in the society in an effort to help the society work towards the UN SDGs. (Romanian practitioner, food & retail)

Here too, the established thinking is noticed as references are made to the relationships with various stakeholders, and the discussion of the balance between voluntary action to address social issues (when the government cannot or doesn’t want to) and the need to regulate in order to provide a guideline to businesses.

Q8: When Doing Good Needs to Be Seen: The Stark Differences Between Practice and Theory

To delve deeper into the work relationship between communicating and doing CSR and sustainability, we asked participants to describe the current working relationship they observe in their organizations. Of particular interest here are the practitioner responses pointing towards the need of communication to aid existing actions, rather than use CSR as a promotional vehicle to help with reputation, visibility and positioning.

No company would do CSR/Sustainability activities if not for PR purposes or under any societal pressure. (Bulgarian consultant)

Hard to generalize. There are companies which do CSR for PR/comms purposes. There are also companies (significantly fewer) that started to look at sustainable development solutions. Those are the companies who are also promoting cooperation, even between competitors, in the field of sustainability but this is still a phenomenon in its infancy. (Romanian practitioner, food & retail)
The academics’ responses also point to this discrepancy between practice and theory, confirming previous observations.

We communicate about it, but do too little to make it the backbone of the way in which we conduct daily business. (Romanian academic)

I think there is still a large confusion between the two terms and that they are to a large extent being used interchangeably in practice. In academia we make a difference when it is taught, but not in practice. (UK academic)

This provides confirmation to our analysis of question 3 and also confirms the position and argument set out in the earlier sections of this chapter. While the German responses focus on the factual relationship between CSR and PR/communication as collaborative (or needing to be collaborative), the Bulgarian and British participants, particularly professionals, focus more on the business motivation of engaging with CSR and thus present PR/communication as the ensuring this effort is “seen”. In contrast, one Romanian practitioners’ answer focuses on the best yet rare practices of companies who in the name of sustainable development join forces and collaborate even if they are competitors.

In the context of discussing emerging theories as well as politicisation, the participants’ mentioning of business models which either fully shift focus to the greater good before profit or discuss this balancing act, are incredibly valuable. They might not yet have acquired the vocabulary of the new theories or giving themselves permission to imagine transformative change and rule (if not game) changes, but they are certainly aware of the debates and, even in such short answers, show a clear reflective engagement with these debates.

Q10: The Hope: Sustainability to Replace CSR (Should Business Allow It) but Pace is Too Slow

Asked about the evolution of CSR and sustainability in the future, participants point to the need for new standards while also indicating their use of current ones. The UN SDGs and the GRI are mentioned most often. Similar to the Triple Bottom Line, the UN SDGs and GRI are slowly reaching a level of international recognition that gives them benchmarking potential.

The shift towards what CSR is and what sustainability should be seen as is there. The influence is dual: firstly, it comes from regulation / legislation. Secondly, the climate is visibility changing and that make people more aware of their consequences. That would create the much-needed social pressure as well as the political pressure on taking sustainability seriously. (Romanian consultant)
With the societal shift of sustainability engagements towards individuals’ e.g. big ocean clean up; Fridays for Future and the likes the Corporate sector has to play a more transparent role in setting new standards. Governments have yet to understand the shift and mindset change and to take on a new role paving the way for a better and greener good. (German practitioner, pharmaceutical sector)

The necessity of new standards however needs to be discussed further. If the focus is on the common good, then perhaps sustainability should be approached as we approach other standards of unit measurement (like the meter and kilogram – offering few options with translation/transference formulas for easy understanding and applications). Moratis’s discussion of ISO 26,000 as a moral rather than economic standard offers a promising alternative (Moratis 2016).

6 Discussion and Conclusions

Our findings are much less about ‘old’ and ‘new’, about culturally and socio-economically determined differences in the understanding and application of CSR and sustainability, and much more about a general ‘lack of imagination’ when it comes to truly innovative, next generation solutions. All our respondents are savvy experienced practitioners with agency and determination to address and solve problems. Yet all of them continue to operate within the given economic paradigm – the “straitjacket of business case approaches” (Moratis and Melissen 2020, p. 235). Compared to this paradigmatic limitation, the differences between functions and even nationalities begin to appear marginal.

The responses show varying focus on certain aspects of CSR and sustainability practice and communication, however we found little evidence that the different perspectives stem from differences in socioeconomic development. Based on these findings, CSR and sustainability are no longer First World issues. If anything, they are ‘worldview issues’ which sooner rather than later might be exposed to transformational challenges.

Our take-away from this study is that whether the focus is CSR communication or sustainability communication, the act of communicating needs to be tied to behaviour and outcomes and thus so should the communication practitioners’ focus – in helping organizations clarify both what those outcomes are but also identifying what they are exactly doing to get there. Where CSR and sustainability go beyond Visser’s third stage of Promotional CSR and toward strategic and systemic application in the interest of society and business (Visser 2016), if not game-changing fourth generation sustainable business models (Melissen and
Moratis 2016), communication has a responsibility not just to relay the issues, but to enable concrete and measurable results.

We conclude that scholars should spend less time talking about how companies communicate about their CSR initiatives and programs and focus more on behaviour change and societal impact, just as the organisations themselves should. In that, we join, if merely by the flow of our argument, a growing group of academics and practitioners calling for a renewed purpose of the communication function, beyond serving clients, businesses and their bottom lines.

7 Reflective Questions

1. In your opinion, how do pandemics influence perceptions and applications of CSR and SC?
2. In times of crisis, including pandemics, what arguments do you believe (should) prevail when it comes to CSR?
3. Should communication professionals adopt and support a unified view on CSR/SC priorities and if so, what should this be?
4. Is it time to consider a paradigm shift in how we look at corporate vs systemic sustainability questions: will moral arguments prevail over profit arguments? Is this already happening? How do we understand the role of SC in this process?
5. What happens when we imagine SC as a driver of change, rather than a ‘participant observer’? Can we apply the ‘activist PR = dissent + protest PR’ formula?
6. How can SC tackle different worldviews and ideologies to support behavioural change so that communication for sustainability is achieved?
7. How would the job description/ requirements/ tasks of a communication practitioner look like if the remit of SC changed towards a radical paradigm shift (away from business models, and toward a broadly consensual moral perspective)?
8. Can such a radical paradigm shift also re-energise the discourse around the UN Sustainable Development Goals?

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