Corporate Social Responsibility and the Rhetorical Situation

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Scholars are increasingly paying attention to the importance of communication in relation to corporate social responsibility as this edited volume attests too. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the relevance of the rhetorical discipline in this regard. Rhetoric is an ancient communication discipline that focuses on the way language and signs are used to persuade an audience. The rhetorical tradition can also be tied to epistemological and philosophical perspectives as we as people “contend against others on matters which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown” (Isocrates, trans. 1929, 15.255). A viewpoint shared by most rhetoricians is that rhetoric helps ideas to get accepted or rejected and it is not possible to “discover” or “unearth” truth. There will always be a need for rhetoric since all types of knowledge must rest upon some kind of human consensus (Farrell, 1999; Scott, 1999).

While the research strand on CSR rhetoric is small, some studies do exist (see, Ihlen, in press). It has for instance been argued that CSR discourse is theological at root in its moral focus (Llewellyn, 1990), and that CSR rhetoric is an attempt to enhance reputation (or image) by showing moral virtue (Bostdorff, 1992). Authors have also directed attention to the strategies that corporations use to come across as credible regarding their environmental commitment (Ihlen, 2009b). Still, one rhetorical perspective that largely has been missing is the focus on how CSR rhetoric is influenced by contextual factors, that is, what can

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corporations say and not say about their relationship to society and the environment? How can we understand CSR rhetoric better by looking at the setting this rhetoric occurs in? To this end, the chapter will discuss the notion of the rhetorical situation, a concept that has been discussed with much vigor by rhetorical scholars since its launch (see, Jasinski, 2001).

The notion of the rhetorical situation was launched by Bitzer (1968). Bitzer expressed surprise that no major rhetorical scholar had dealt thoroughly with the nature of the situation or the context in which rhetoric is created. The rhetorical situation as he developed it as an analytical concept directs attention in particular to how a rhetor faces a rhetorical problem and how contextual factors influence what the rhetor—the one communicating—can and cannot say. All situations have certain constraints which the rhetor must understand in order to succeed. It has for instance become commonplace that corporations declare that they have responsibilities beyond profit-making. At the same time, these responsibilities can be defined strategically since CSR is an ambiguous term. The notion of the rhetorical situation helps us analyze the corporate rhetorical maneuvering in this territory that presents the corporations with constraints, but also opportunities that can be grasped. The strategies will be discussed on a theoretical and empirical level drawing on data from an analysis of the rhetoric of the top 30 corporations from the Global Fortune 500 list. It is argued that it is of utmost importance to understand CSR rhetoric since it is a crucial component for corporations’ attempts to come across as legitimate entities and respond to civil pressure. Corporations must continuously justify their role in society, and CSR will be discussed as the corporate answer to the pressing problem of legitimacy. CSR is a process of mapping and evaluating demands from stakeholders, as well as the development and implementation of actions and policies to meet (or ignore) these demands. CSR focuses on the corporate handling of economic, social and environmental concerns. CSR communication in turn is defined as the ways that corporations communicate in and about this process; it is the corporate use of
symbols and language regarding these matters.

The chapter starts off with a very brief introduction to rhetoric as an academic field, before moving on to a literature review of studies of CSR rhetoric. This section is followed by a section that discusses the notion of the rhetorical situation in more detail. Then the chapter turns to and discusses the situation of the modern corporation drawing on an analysis of the non-financial reports from the top 30 corporations in the world. Lastly, a conclusion section discusses some of the more important points that that the analysis demonstrates and reflects on avenues for further research in this area.

Literature Review

The Rhetorical Tradition

Rhetoric helps us understand how knowledge is generated and socially constructed through discourse. Thus, in recognition of this central role of discourse, there has been a turn towards rhetoric in many academic disciplines. Scholars of communication, public relations, organizational communication, philosophy, management, economics, law, political science, social psychology, history, anthropology, political science, sociology, and literature have all drawn on rhetoric (Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999b; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008).

In the Western rhetorical tradition the works of Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian loom large (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Cicero, trans. 2001; Quintilian, trans. 1920/1996). The best-known definition of rhetoric in this tradition is given by Aristotle: “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, trans. 1991, 1.2.1). However, the Isocrates quote used in the introduction also directs attention to the fact that rhetoric can also be seen as an inwards oriented process and point to the epistemic quality of rhetoric. Rhetoric constructs and modifies reality, social conditions, and relationships. New rhetoricians (e.g., Burke, 1950/1969; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca,
1969/1971) set out to expand the scope of rhetoric to include all forms of symbol use and also pointed out how modern rhetors can use mass media and thus reach larger and vastly more diverse audiences. Public relations scholars have also suggested several analytical models for public relations based on the work of ancients such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2002; Porter, in press), Isocrates (Heath, 2009; Marsh, 2003; Porter, in press), and new rhetoricians such as Toulmin (Skerlep, 2001), and Burke and Perelman (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2004; Mickey, 1995). Scholars in the field of organizational communication have also made use of rhetoric (see Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004 for an overview). These theorists have typically made a strong case for focusing on how reality is defined and created through the use of rhetoric, in line with the epistemological debate already touched upon. Indeed, organizational scholars of various kinds have made great strides recently in bridging management and organizational rhetoric (i.e., Sillince & Suddaby, 2008), and public relations scholars are now following suit (i.e., Heath, in press), demonstrating the importance of external rhetoric.

Rhetorical Studies of CSR

Despite the burgeoning of the corporation as the dominating modern institution rhetoricians have not been very eager to engage with CSR. The literature on CSR rhetoric is relatively meager and it is not possible to find much on the topic in the main rhetoric journals like Quarterly Journal of Speech, Rhetoric Society Quarterly, Rhetorica, Rhetoric Review, or Rhetoric and Public Affairs. Some scattered rhetorical CSR studies can be found elsewhere however.

The first lengthy scholarly investigation into CSR and rhetoric specifically was probably the dissertation of John Llewellyn (1990). Looking at the Ball Corporation and the pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly and interpretations of CSR, Llewellyn argued that the CSR
rhetoric could be characterized as theological at root and consisting of two branches, sect and church discourse. The sect discourse sees companies as “true believers” and CSR issues are treated in black and white terms. The church-like discourse, on the other hand, is more nuanced. The gospel that unites corporations using a church discourse is that CSR will pay in the long run.

The so-called value advocacy of organizations have been researched by Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven L. Vibbert (1994), pointing to how organizations attempt to appeal to shared cultural values in order to enhance their image, deflect criticism and establish value premises they can use in their rhetoric later. Bostdorff (1992) has also demonstrated how rhetoric is used to show moral virtue and hence increase legitimacy. Organizations need to demonstrate the positive values of their acts, the purity of their purpose, and how they have embraced a highly valued social role.

Jill J. McMillian (2007) has questioned whether companies currently are poised to take on the responsibility challenge. McMillian sees a problem in the corporate rationality and argues that CSR rhetoric is typically characterized by traits such as “instrumentality, exclusivity, attribution, monologue and narcissism” (p. 22). In her view, there is a need for a shirt towards connection, reciprocity, and trust. Corporations should aim for the creation of “mutual dwelling place[s]” (McMillian, 2007, p. 25).

The creation of mutual “dwelling places” can be seen as a crucial activity for ethos-building, that is, attempts to strengthen credibility. This has also been the focus of several studies (Ihlen, 2009b; Waeraas & Ihlen, 2009), and is something that will be discussed later in this chapter. The two latter studies focus on environmental issues, and there are several studies looking into corporate rhetoric regarding such matters. Paystrup (1995, 1996), for instance, researched how the US plastics industry introduced recycling as a strategy to combat restrictions.
Ihlen (2009a) demonstrated how the climate rhetoric of the 30 largest companies in the world was characterized by four topics: 1) the environmental situation is characterized as grave; 2) the corporation is said to be in line with the scientific consensus and the international political process on curbing emissions (testimony); 3) it is stated that the corporation has to take measures to reduce its own emissions (relationship); and 4) the climate challenge is cast as an opportunity for business (circumstance).

Also looking at the issue of climate change Livesey (2002) showed how a particular agent—ExxonMobil—applied the termistic screen (see Burke, 1966) of the market to shift focus from consequences of global warming to consequences of government policy, turning the Market into a god-term, replacing precaution with prudence, scapegoating government, most scientists, and environmentalists, while portraying itself as the savior of a certain lifestyle. Livesey has also pointed out how the adaptation of CSR discourse and sustainable development has helped Shell with its identity needs and “contributed to revising the progress myth that underpins modern corporations and a capitalist economy” (Livesey & Graham, 2007, p. 346).

To summarize, rhetorical scholars have not engaged much with the CSR phenomenon. It has been argued, however, that CSR discourse is theological at root, and that it is an attempt to enhance reputation (or image) by showing moral virtue. To this end, various topics and ethos strategies are used. So far, however, nobody has written about the rhetorical situation of corporations. This is the focus of the next section.

The Rhetorical Situation

With his 1968-article on the rhetorical situation, Lloyd F. Bitzer drew attention to the importance of context and how this influences—or even creates—rhetoric. Bitzer argued that no major theorist had dealt with the rhetorical situation as a distinct subject despite its
controlling and fundamental role. The notion of the rhetorical situation has since be debated by several scholars (see below), but it is also recognized as one of the lasting contributions from modern rhetorical theory (Garret & Xiao, 1993; Jasinski, 2001; Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999a; Young, 2001). Here it will be argued that the notion is particularly inept to help understand how and why CSR rhetoric looks the way it does.

The rhetorical situation was defined this way by Bitzer:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6)

According to Bitzer, rhetorical situations have three constituting elements: The first element is a pressing problem (‘exigence’) or an imperfection that “demands” a rhetorical response and that has to be solved (wholly or partially) with the help of rhetoric. The problem may be latent and there is no guarantee that it will be solved once and for all either. The pressing problem is nonetheless the organizing principle for a situation and what specifies the public and the change that is wished for. An example used by Bitzer is how air pollution is an environmental problem. A rhetor may argue for stricter legislation and regulation, and thus help to modify or reduce the problem. The pressing problem for the rhetor is then to persuade legislators about the need for stricter legislation.

In a later article, Bitzer (1980) emphasized how such problems are always tied to interests. The fact that a factory spews emissions may be undisputed, but whether or not this should be perceived as a problem is open to discussion. Some may believe that a little pollution is tolerable, some may call for a tax on pollution, and yet others may wish to ban pollution altogether.
The second element of the rhetorical situation is the audience that is the rhetor’s target to change thoughts, decision or actions. Bitzer (1968) reserves the notion of rhetoric for a particular type of discourse as he emphasizes that the rhetorical audience has to be capable of being influenced and also to affect some change in relation to the pressing problem the rhetor addresses. The audience must agree that something is a problem, that there is a certain imperfection that needs to be addressed. Politicians are an obvious audience in the above example, but the general public may also put pressure on the politicians to change the environmental legislation. The relationship between audience and rhetor may be characterized by similar or dissimilar views of “facts” and/or interests.

The third constituting element in the rhetorical situation is constraints, most often understood as something that presents an obstacle for the rhetor to succeed in solving a problem. The constraints can be rhetorical, but also physical and cultural. One example that is mentioned is how a politician’s reputation can hinder his or her reelection. Another example is how disagreement among scientists is a constraint for those who want to rally science for their cause (Jasinski, 2001). The constraints in a rhetorical situation impose limits for what the rhetor can say and do.

Together, these three elements constitute the rhetorical situation and Bitzer argues that they prescribe certain fitting responses. The rhetor must define and translate the problem in to words, identify an audience that may help solve the problem, and understand the constraints in the situation and hence what is required of his or her rhetoric. In summary, Bitzer’s theory alerts us to the fact that a situation has some elements that the rhetorical response has to reflect.

The Debate about the Rhetorical Situation

Some has protested that Bitzer seemingly only recognize rhetoric that is successful,
that is, rhetoric that helps to solve the problem that is described. This would be an unnecessary limitation of the domain of rhetoric (Larson, 1970). What has caused most debate, however, is the epistemological basis of the theory when Bitzer talks about a pressing problem and how the rhetorical situation determinates the rhetorical response (Jasinski, 2001; Kjeldsen, 1997; Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999; Young, 2001). Richard E. Vatz has been among the strongest critics and he argues that Bitzer’s perspective has its roots in realism and the notion of an objective reality. For Vatz (1973) it has been a point that the rhetorical response is not a product of objective events, but a result of how a rhetor and an audience interpret a situation or a problem. The rhetor must be seen as creative and active, something Bitzer’s defenders have argued is already implicit in the theory (Young, 2001). The most important point here, however, is that theoreticians seem to agree that it is not a question of either/or, but that rhetoric is both a response to situations and something that create and shapes situations (Jasinski, 2001).

Another objection to Bitzer is that he puts little emphasis on how the rhetor is part of the audience and has to adjust him- or herself to discourse traditions that generate needs, promotes interest, cultivate audience’s expectations of what is fitting in a situation, and influence their perception and interpretation of a problem. The discourse tradition that a rhetor operates within produces the conditions for its own continuation, recirculation and reproduction (Garret & Xiao, 1993). Turning focus on the audience some of the issues tied to whether or not a pressing problem is real or not disappears. The important point for the rhetor is what the audience perceives to be a problem. Biesecker (1999) extends this point and argues that rhetoric is not a linear process, but rather a process whereby persons and collectives articulates identities that are influenced by shifting historical conditions. This aspect is obviously interesting, but as pointed out by others, this focus over shadows the importance of the problem that the rhetor faces (Garret & Xiao, 1993).
Inspired by Smith and Lybarger (1996), this chapter will modify Bitzer’s theory on some accounts and use them as a spring board to generate some analytical questions. The most important point is that there is a need to dissolve the deterministic dimension of the model that is present despite Bitzer’s modification by including interests (Bitzer, 1980). Rather than talk about how the problem control, the causal direction should be problematized in line with the notion of the active and creative rhetor that sees possibilities to create or influence the situation (Ihlen, 2007).

The Rhetorical Situation of the Multinational Corporation

The following discussion of the rhetorical situation of the multinational corporation draws on the CSR literature and empirical data from an analysis of the rhetoric of the top corporations from the Global Fortune 500 list (see also, Ihlen, 2008, November). The latter list was consulted in July 2007, and the top 30 corporations and their textual output on their homepages, in their annual reports and CSR reports (where available) were chosen as data material. CSR was defined widely so that the material included non-financial reports with titles such as “Corporate Citizenship Report 2007” and “Sustainability Report 2007”. The reports were downloaded from the corporations’ homepages.

The Exigence: A Call for Response

The corporation as an institution has been a target of criticism almost since its inception. Critics have pointed to, for instance, consequences of monopoly power, unduly political influence and environmental destruction (Perrow, 2002). Multinational companies have since been leading drivers in a new global economy and the corporation has turned into society’s dominant economic institution (Bakan, 2004; Jones, 2005). This new globalization process has been accompanied by increased debate over issues such as deregulation,
privatization, outsourcing, sweatshops, resource extraction, human rights, labor rights and environmental destruction. Critics have focused on corporate influence on the public sphere and democracy (Boggs, 2000; Hertz, 2003), general business practices (Bakan, 2004; Klein, 2000), appropriation of green values (Bruno & Karliner, 2002; Welford, 1997), and the influence on our lives in the workplace (Deetz, 1992). The corporation has also been criticized for its limited economic rationality: Since profit is the overarching motive for business, corporations will attempt to externalize its costs, i.e., get others to pay for them (Bakan, 2004; Fisher & Lovell, 2003).

The issues and the debates mentioned above are relevant for corporations since they need legitimacy in order to survive in the long run. The core idea from organizational theory is that since society has decided that the business institution is needed, society can also decide whether that institution should cease to exist. Legitimacy in this sense can be defined as having sufficient public support for continued existence (e.g., Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Elsbach, 1994; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Willke & Willke, 2008; Wæraas, 2007). A legitimacy gap occurs when there is a discrepancy between a corporation’s performance and society’s expectations of that corporation (Sethi, 1977). Corporations need to stay within the boundaries and norms established by society to be perceived as legitimate. If corporations cannot keep their house in order, governments will introduce new rules and regulations. This, in turn, might lead to increased costs and can reduce the flexibility of the corporations. Furthermore, conflicts with the environment can be both time consuming and costly (Davis, 1973). The controversy around corporations means that they have to come up with an appropriate answer to deter measures that would hamper business. This situation can be deemed rhetorical since it is a discursive response that is called for (and arguably also a change of business practice).
The Audience

The audience is the entity that can confer legitimacy on the corporation. Attention is often turned to the stakeholder concept to map the audience. A typical textbook definition sees stakeholders as “those people and groups that affect, or can be affected by, an organization’s decisions, policies, and operations” (Post, Lawrence, & Weber, 2002, p. 8). The stakeholder concept has its prime merit in pointing to the important relational aspects of organizations, and it functions as a useful heuristic in this sense. The basic idea is that an organization’s success depends how it is able to manage its relationships with key groups, such as customers, employees, suppliers, communities, politicians, owners, and others, that can affect its ability to reach its goals (Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Freeman, 1984; Freeman & Philips, 2002; Jones, Wicks, & Freeman, 2002; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).

It is said that a company has primary stakeholders, that is, stakeholders that are critical for the continued existence of the company. This group includes customers, suppliers, employees, and investors. A company also has secondary stakeholders that are affected, directly or indirectly, by the company’s decisions. These relationships occur as a consequence of business activities, and such groups might be local communities, the media, business support groups, state and local government, social activist groups, and so forth (Werther & Chandler, 2006).

The audience is considered rhetorical to the extent that it can be influenced and affect the change that the corporations crave—a restored legitimacy and thus a public standing that secures the corporations’ ability to carry on business. Corporations have to pay attention to governments and authorities that can have immediate influence on business through legislation and policies. At the same time other stakeholders—critical NGOs, the mass media, community groups, investors, etc.—have an influence. The multinational corporation has a highly complex environment and meets such stakeholders at the local, regional, national and
international level. According to stakeholder theory it becomes the manager’s job “to keep
the support of all of these groups, balancing their interests, while making the organization a
place where stakeholder interests can be maximized over time” (Freeman & Philips, 2002, p.
333).

Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) argue that stakeholders can be identified and ranked
based on the salience of the traits of legitimacy, urgency, and power. Legitimacy is the
perception or assumption that the actions of a stakeholder are desirable, proper, or
appropriate. Urgency refers to whether the claims of a stakeholder call for attention
immediately. And power can be the force, the material, financial or symbolic resources a
stakeholder have. The stakeholders with all three traits present the definitive stakeholders of
the organization (Mitchell, et al., 1997). It follows that this stakeholder group is the most
important to communicate with as well.

Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen (2008) conclude that there is no point in
communicating CSR to the general public if the purpose is to strengthen the reputation of a
corporation. Instead you have to start with expert stakeholders (critical stakeholders, the
media, local decision makers) and give them factually oriented information about what the
company is doing. This type of communication should be specialized in the sense that some
background knowledge is needed. While this information may be presented at the homepage
of the company, it is really not intended for the general public. When the latter is the prime
target, the company should instead rely on third party strategies, that is, indirect
communication.

Constraints

Constraints limit what can be said by the rhetor; they can be physical, theoretical or
emotional and stem from the rhetor, the audience or the environment. A first constraint that
suggests itself in the rhetorical situation of the multinational corporation is the need to declare that it takes responsibility. Free market liberalists have argued that the responsibility of corporations is to make money for the owners (Friedman, 1970; Henderson, 2001). Still, today even these critics recognize that “for most managers the only real question about CSR is how to do it” (The Economist, 2008, p. 12). CSR is embraced by leading institutions like the European Union and the World Bank (Commission of the European Communities, 2001; World Bank, 2006), and market research has consistently showed how customers express that corporations need to behave responsible. For instance, in a large 1999-poll—25,000 citizens in 23 countries on 6 continents—it was concluded that two in three “citizens want companies to go beyond their historical role of making a profit, paying taxes, employing people and obeying all laws; they want companies to contribute to broader societal goals as well” (Environics International Ltd, 2000, p. 2). Then again, marketing research has also shown that this attitude does not necessarily translate into action (The Harris Poll, 2007). What remains, nonetheless, is that large multinational corporations at least have to declare that they care about something more than just profit. To argue the contrary in public would invite a flurry of criticism and endanger relationships to key stakeholders and markets.

A second major constraint that corporations face is that the public tends to be skeptical of corporate claims (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2008). Some critics argue that CSR is an attempt to put a human face on capitalism in order to carry on with harmful practices. CSR is seen as a form of manipulation to deceive the public (Christian Aid, 2004; Cloud, 2007; Woolfson & Beck, 2005). As mentioned, the limited rationality of corporations has also been criticized: “corporations cannot fully act in socially responsible ways because they possess a perspective on nature that is extremely limited. … Corporations [are] unable to handle concepts of value beyond instrumentality” (Fisher & Lovell, 2003, p. 281). Furthermore, as already mentioned, the business argument for CSR is often summarized as enlightened self-
interest. CSR has an instrumental or utilitarian basis where most things are seen in monetary terms. Empirical research indicates that companies are quite similar in this respect (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003). L’Etang (2006) argues that from a Kantian perspective “there is clearly something wrong about claiming moral capital while at the same time being driven largely by self-interest” (p. 414). If the argument for a duty based perspective is supported, corporations should be careful not to cast themselves as ethical agents primarily (Crane & Matten, 2004).

A third type of constraint worth mentioning is the complexity of the cultural systems that the multinational corporations navigate in. Specific cultural values also present a constraint to the corporate rhetor. For instance, in some Asian cultures it may seem that silence on CSR is the best strategy and donors are expected to be anonymous. In Scandinavian countries, a minimalist approach is advised. While 96 % of Danes believe that CSR is very important, most of them are skeptical and do not want corporations to communicate too “loudly” about their CSR commitments (Morsing, et al., 2008).

The Corporate Rhetoric

The corporate rhetorical response has to be fitting to the situation; corporations have to define the pressing problem, identify the rhetorical audience and take into account the constraints of the situation. Given the previous research in this area, it is not surprising to find that all of the researched companies for this paper devoted parts of their homepages to CSR issues and 29 out of 30 companies issued non-financial reports (see also, Ihlen, 2008, November). This finding is consistent with the trend observed elsewhere: CSR reporting has become the norm, not the exception and the CSR concept is high on the corporate agenda (Kolk, 2008; KPMG, 2008). To tout CSR thinking and action must be seen as the prime corporate response to the criticism of the corporate role in society, i.e., the main strategy to
close the legitimacy gap (Sethi, 1977).

The CSR rhetoric that is researched in this chapter is on public display and does not bear any resemblance with expert discourse. It is difficult to identify single target groups just by looking at the texts themselves. Instead it can be argued that the rhetoric has the universal audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969/1971) as a target group. The universal audience would include every “competent and reasonable” adult. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argues that the rhetor should try to convince this universal audience and build arguments that are valid, independent of local and historical contingencies. What is considered as valid facts, truths, and values are culturally dependent, but the rhetor, nonetheless, has to assume the existence of something that has timeless validity. In dealing with such matters, the rhetor addresses a universal audience (Gross & Dearin, 2003).

At the corporate level, the researched companies have a rather uniform approach to CSR. They certainly do not follow a strategy of silence on the topic, but of course, additional research is needed to assess if more aggressive communication tactics, such as image advertisements, etc., follow the CSR reports and websites. At the corporate level it seems that a discourse collective has grown around the CSR concept, with only minor regional differences. The Chinese oil company Sinopec says it “will strive for harmony by contributing to the growth of the economy, whilst protecting the environment and fulfilling its social responsibilities” (Sinopec, 2007, p. 7). The emphasis on “harmony” demonstrates a Confucian value in Chinese culture (Liu, 1998; Roper & Weymes, 2007). In fact, “harmony” is used throughout the reports from all the three Chinese corporations in the sample, as well as in the report from Toyota. None of the Western corporations made use of the term. State Grid writes about harmonious interactions, relationships, enterprise, as well as harmonious electricity (!). Besides this trait, however, the Asian reports are quite similar to the Western reports.
To overcome skepticism, the researched corporations applied the following ethos strategies:

- Standards: Every single one of the top 30 corporations made reference to some CSR standard that they espoused, for instance GRI, ILO or Global Compact.
- Memberships: 90% of the corporations said they were members in an organization like for instance Amnesty International or Transparency International.
- Partnerships: 80% of the corporations pointed to how they had some kind of partnership with other organizations, for instance World Wildlife Foundation (WWF).
- Certification: 73% of the corporations used some kind of certification, for instance ISO 14001, ISA 3000, or Assurance Standards.
- Third party endorsement: 53% used quotes from independent third parties—experts, politicians, people from other organizations—addressing the CSR work of the corporation.

All of these strategies are attempts to lend the credibility of some outside organization, thus avoiding criticism of both the actual CSR claims and the motive behind the CSR action. These and other ethos strategies have been documented in other studies as well (Ihlen, 2009b). Still, it seems difficult for the corporations to address the criticism of the instrumentality that drives much CSR thinking (Fisher & Lovell, 2003; L'Etang, 2006).

Looking at the rhetoric of the top 30 companies, half of the companies refrained from commenting on the motives of their CSR engagement. Two companies argued that they had a duty to engage with CSR, while the rest (43%) pointed to enlightened self-interest and/or reputation as the driver. This finding is consistent with extant research that has singled out improving image or reputation as a crucial goal for business’ social action (Vidaver-Cohen & Brønn, 2008). However, as long as the main goal for CSR activities is to improve reputation
then companies should not be surprised if public sentiment towards CSR is lukewarm or negative. The purpose behind CSR acts as reputation-building efforts might become too apparent and the company thus enters a vicious circle. The dilemma is of course that society would like corporations to engage in CSR and that it is likely that CSR is only possible where a company’s profits will be enhanced. In other words: It is impossible to escape the self-interested perspective as corporations seek financial profits at any cost (Munshi & Kurian, 2005).

While the discussion above have explored some constraining factors for the corporate rhetor, it also worth to point out that the rhetorical situation offers the corporation some opportunities as well. First of all, it needs to be mentioned that corporations differ widely in terms of the pressure they experience and the extent to which their legitimacy is challenged. An obvious example would be that the coal mining company affects the environment to a greater degree than an insurance company does. This also leads to what has been called the self promoter’s paradox: “The more problematic the legitimacy of a company is, the more skeptical are constituents of legitimation attempts” (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990, p. 191). In addition, the limited resources and the limited space/time in the media give the result that some huge companies slip under the media radar and are not covered in any systematic fashion (Capriotti, in press; Ihlen & Capriotti, 2007).

Secondly, it has been argued that corporations do not necessarily have to go overboard with their CSR engagement. The argument that CSR pays seems to be true for some corporations, in some situations during some of the time (Vogel, 2005). As pointed out already, consumers do not necessarily reward CSR companies and some of the most profitable companies in the world have either offended environmentalists (ExxonMobil) or operate in sectors that many would question ethically in the first place (tobacco, arms manufacturing, pornography, etc.). Furthermore, one could speculate that for some
companies, a CSR-scandal can give a short-term dent in the reputation of the company, but that it does not necessarily translate into crisis on a major scale that threatens the very survival of the company. For small and unknown corporations the situation may be entirely different. The stakeholders of a multi-national corporation are widely dispersed and have different legitimacy, power, interests and values (Mitchell, et al., 1997). Unless there is a critical mass of detractors and a coordinated campaign against the corporation (think Shell and Nike), it seems that corporations only suffer minor setbacks in many CSR-scandals.

An additional point that ties in with the latter is that many corporations are so embedded in the social fabric of society that they may be “forgiven” for their CSR transgressions. Corporations need to strengthen their ethos and justify behavior that has negative consequences, for instance, causing environmental damage. Oil companies do extract non-renewable resources and contribute to climate change through production of fossil fuels. Still, they can point to an increase in energy demand and how alternative energy sources will not be able to meet this demand for many years to come (International Energy Agency, 2008).

A fourth point to be made is that the ambiguous nature of the CSR concept lets companies define CSR so that it can fit with their strategic interests. About half of the corporations researched for this paper explicitly defined CSR in their non-financial reports, a little over a quarter defined it on their homepage, and about a fifth of them included CSR definitions in their annual reports. For the most part, however, the corporations chose rather vague formulations like: “Our world is changing: Declining natural systems, climate change and energy crises affect us and threaten future generations. As a large international company, we know we must play our part to restore the life support systems of the earth [emphasis added]” (Wal-Mart, 2008, para. 1). Other companies, like Total, seemed to resort to circular arguments: “Accepting our responsibility means recognizing that we play an important role
in society, asserting our commitment to acting as a responsible global citizen” (Total, 2007, p. 5). In Rather than talk about how the problem control, the causal direction should be problematized in line with the notion of the active and creative rhetor that sees possibilities to create or influence the situation (Ihlen, 2007). Other words, the contention that the definitions of CSR are relatively unclear is supported (Crowther & Rayman-Bacchus, 2004).

Something good and something bad can be said for this. That the CSR concept remains so open, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the corporations. On the one side it can be difficult to map and monitor the changing expectations, on the other side corporations can argue for their own take on CSR. The value of strategic ambiguity can be highlighted (Eisenberg, 2007). If the corporations use CSR as an “open” concept, employees and other stakeholders can fill in the blanks and make the concept more meaningful for themselves. This might even be a political necessity, and it certainly invites in more perspectives and more stakeholders. The negative, on the other hand, is that CSR might end up meaning everything and nothing at the same time (Christensen & Morsing, 2007).

Conclusion

The main contribution of a rhetorical perspective on CSR communication lies in the ability to demonstrate how and why corporations communicate the way they do about CSR. Rhetoric helps to understand the symbolic strategies that are used, and can also serve as a starting point for those that wish to criticize and hold corporations accountable for their actions. CSR is seen as a strategy to improve reputation and strengthen legitimacy. It is through CSR rhetoric corporations conceptualize their relationship to society and the environment and seek to come across as legitimate entities.

While rhetoricians have analyzed CSR rhetoric using theoretical concepts like terministic screen (Livesey, 2002) and looked at appeals to virtues (Bostdorff, 1992), in this
chapter it is the notion of the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) that has been discussed. Through a modification of this concept, opening up the causal direction and also see that rhetor as an active agent, it is possible to talk about how the rhetorical situation offers both constraints that the rhetor must pay attention to and opportunities that the rhetor can grasp. This theoretical point has then been illustrated through the analysis of CSR rhetoric. More specifically, applying the notion of the rhetorical situation to the CSR rhetoric of the top 30 corporations in the world helped illustrate some broader explanatory factors:

The pressing problem for corporations is to convince its audience that it does take its social responsibility seriously and that the society is better off for letting the corporation exist. A certain discourse collective has grown around CSR, the corporations claim to balance concerns for economy, society and the environment, so that everyone wins.

It seems that the corporations have to argue that they are looking beyond pure economic profit. Still, corporations are not only bound by such constraints in the rhetorical situation, they can also grasp opportunities in the situation. For one, major corporations are often so embedded in the economic and social structure that they are given leeway.

The rhetorical situation alerts us to the fact that a situation has some elements that a rhetorical response has to reflect if it is going to be a fitting response. The corporate rhetoric seems to be appropriate for the rhetorical situation the corporations find themselves in if an instrumental yardstick is used. No global CSR regulations seem immediately impeding. Although national legislation in many countries give some protection to workers and the environment, “in the vast majority of countries, companies face very little regulation” (Marsden, 2006, p. 26). While certainly not putting an end to the debate or criticism of corporations, the CSR response has at least been well received in some important circles like the United Nations and the European Union. And perhaps more importantly from the corporations’ perspective--they are huge and very profitable as witnessed by the placement
on the Fortune list. On the other hand, the falling trust in business has the potential to pose a problem for the same companies. But for the most part, business is still rife.

From an ethical viewpoint the rhetoric of the corporations can be criticized for not creating common dwelling places. It is a question whether they are moving away from what has been called a one-way, self absorbed and celebratory rhetoric to truly recognize dilemmas (Ihlen, 2009c; McMillian, 2007; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). In this sense there is clearly room for improvement of CSR policies and actions. It is also pertinent to remember that CSR should not only be reduced to a question of communicating. As such it is easy to concur with those that argue that the main focus needs to be on responsible action in general and the solution of specific material problems (Christensen, 2007).

A typical claim is that CSR is an attempt to put a human face on capitalism, and that it only helps to further a growth oriented economy. CSR is a form of hegemonic newspeak that do not challenge, but helps to increase the economic power rather that help us ask what must be the main question: how should society be organized. Instead, CSR privilege the corporation and the economic discourse (Banerjee, 2007, 2008; Nyeng, 2009). There is precious little evidence of the contrary in the CSR rhetoric research for this chapter.

For those that wish to research CSR rhetoric closer, several options exist. The presented analysis in this chapter has moved on a macro institutional level and not paid nearly enough attention to the peculiarities that exist pertaining to the historical, political, cultural and social setting of individual corporations. Far more can be done looking at specific companies to extend on, reformulate, problematize or reject the findings presented above. A particularly interesting research avenue would be to research the public reception of CSR rhetoric across different cultures. Some stakeholder groups in some cultures may be more willing to accept “grandiose” declarations about CSR. Here, however, it is evident that more research is needed. What is the importance of cultural differences and similarities for
the rhetorical strategy of corporations? This is largely an empirical question that can be approached by for instance focus group research and polling techniques, coupled with a text and context sensitive rhetorical perspective. More research could also be conducted on how the rhetorical situation differs in different sectors, and how claims about CSR activity are supported more specifically by ethos, logos and pathos appeals.
References


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Footnote


(The following reports were included for analysis: Allianz, 2006; American International Group, 2007; Assicurazioni Generali, 2007; AXA, 2007; Bank of America, 2007; BNP Paribas, 2007; BP, 2007; Chevron, 2007; China National Petroleum Corporation, 2007; Citigroup, 2007; ConocoPhillips, 2007; DaimlerChrysler, 2007; Eni, 2007; ExxonMobil, 2007; Ford, 2006; Fortis, 2007; General Electric, 2007; General Motors, 2007; HSBC, 2007; ING Group, 2007; Shell Group, 2007; Siemens, 2007; Sinopec, 2007; State Grid, 2007; Total, 2007; Toyota, 2007; UBS, 2007; Volkswagen AG, 2005; Wal-Mart, 2007).