

THE ROLE OF INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR CSR COMMUNICATION

Gianpaolo Tomaselli, Monia Melia

Department of Law, History, Economics and Social Sciences (DSGSES)

University “Magna Graecia” of Catanzaro, Viale Europa – Germaneto, 88100 Catanzaro (Italy)

Abstract

This work aims to investigate the roles of new interactive technologies to communicate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). We adopt the case study method and examine three companies that have successfully approached and developed CSR communication campaigns during the last few years. The study shows how companies use interactive technologies, website and traditional communication channels in integrative ways. Interactive technologies allow more interaction, dialogue and experience sharing. It stresses the contribution of web and social media in making CSR issues more pervasive, appealing and interactive.

Key words: Corporate social responsibility, communication, interactive technologies

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a topic of broad, global interest in the fields of academia, business and government. When defining CSR, the European Commission (2001) affirmed that “companies of all types decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment” and “companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis”. CSR can be viewed as the responsibility of business which goes beyond the economic aspect and refers to “the type and scope of social obligations that corporations must consider in the course of their routine business practices” (Shamir 2005; Chaundri & Wang 2007, p. 234). Although it concerns a wide range of issues such as “environmental matters, product safety, human rights, human dignity, alleviation of global poverty, eradication of pandemic disease, economic development, sustainability, and community involvement” (Rindova et al. 2005; Pirsch, Gupta & Grau 2007; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013, p. 59).

It is becoming more and more important for companies to communicate their CSR as it may influence leaders’ opinions and behavior. Global communication creates a context where public opinion does not trust organizations that overstate their social behavior (Watts & Holme 1999), which is why public opinion is itself becoming an important regulator of organizational CSR (Esrock & Leichty 1998).

Internet is increasingly becoming one of the main tools for disclosure of CSR information (Harmoni 2012). Unlike traditional media (newspapers, magazines, billboards, television and radio), it allows the company to publicize detailed and up-to-date information. Moreover, the information remains permanently available on the web, allowing the users to choose which subjects to access.

Corporate websites provide an official perspective regarding CSR within the corporation for all its stakeholders, while interactive technologies are used not only to give more visibility to the companies’ social and environmental responsibility programs but also to allow maximum interaction with the stakeholders themselves.

Web technologies facilitate dialogue with stakeholders and furnish several benefits in terms of reputation enhancement and customer loyalty, the attraction and retention of competent employees, the gathering of data, information and feedback on social trends (Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013). In addition to corporate web sites, companies are increasing the use of main social network platforms to involve stakeholders in more direct, immediate and interactive communication (Antal et al. 2002; Chaundri & Wang 2007; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013).

Indeed the use of social pages by business companies is constantly increasing (HSM Italia Research 2010). Facebook represents the main social network used by firms, with a percentage of 85%, followed by You Tube (63%), Twitter (48%) and LinkedIn (27%).

However, in Italy the use of web services and social media for corporate communication is still limited and only 12% of companies use them to communicate their own CSR strategy and related activities (Lundquist report 2012). Drawing from these considerations and from the scant attention paid to communication in CSR research (Birth et al. 2008), specifically through new technologies, our paper aims to explore the role of interactive technologies for the communication of a firm's social and environmental responsibilities.

The work is structured as follows: First, we provide a review of the available literature on the main contributions of CSR communication and new technologies for CSR communication. The following section outlines research design. Then the empirical findings are presented and discussed. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications and main limitations of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing interest in the social and environmental side of business has recently turned particular attention to the tools used by companies to communicate their CSR activities to the stakeholders (Chaudhri & Wang 2007). According to Dawkins (2004) and Hooghiemstra (2000) this process is due to the need for transparency and the necessity of the adoption of an ethical behavior by enterprises in order to build their corporate reputation and create value. Communication is of paramount importance for CSR since it became a "key issue of concern" for businesses (Capriotti & Moreno 2007) because it has been recognized as an important factor which influences the image, the reputation and the relations between corporations and stakeholders (Etter 2013).

According to the Arvidsson study (2009), the communication issue concerns the identification of the typologies of CSR information that needs to be communicated and how it should be communicated in order to satisfy the stakeholders' need of information and, at the same time, legitimate their behavior. Ellerup, Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) underlined the fact that companies seem completely unprepared for this task and identify the existence of the lack of a framework for CSR communication. In their work, Hartman, Rubin and Dhanda (2007) have sustained that firms exhibit different ways and choices in communicating their own corporate social responsibility activities, values and programs, which may depend on the audience being addressed. Through the adoption of a communicative, strategic CSR approach, companies can achieve different long-term benefits such as: i) reducing the risks of a negative impact on their reputation because of other firms' activities; ii) protecting corporate reputation; and iii) attracting and retaining valuable employees by maintaining a high level of morale (Hartman, Rubin & Dhanda 2007, p. 377).

The literature review reveals the existence of two main schools of approach used by firms to communicate social responsibility: the proactive vs. the reactive approach (Arvidsson 2009; Birth et al. 2008; Woodward, Edwards & Birkin 2001; Etter 2013) and the soft vs. the hard approach (Tixier 2003).

Arvidsson (2009) evidenced the distinction between the *proactive approach* and the *reactive approach*. The proactive approach consists in the company's CSR communication carried out with the aim of impeding the arising of legitimacy concerns, while, the reactive approach is the CSR communication of companies in reaction to some event which needs to be faced such as a corporate crisis (Birth et al 2008; Woodward, Edwards & Birkin 2001). Moreover, Etter (2013) defined the reactive approach as a "reactive interaction approach" in which enterprises do not seek the interaction itself but use it to interact only when they are addressed by stakeholders (e.g. the case of interactive communication through social media). However, there is an ongoing debate on which of the two approaches is the more followed by firms. Seithi (2002), was the first to distinguish social responsibility from corporate social responsiveness and then defined social responsibility as reactive and corporate social responsiveness as proactive. Brytting (2005) and Lantos (2001) sustain that

companies can manage their CSR activities in two ways, either to obtain and/or avoid certain consequences or to behave according to what is commonly believed to be the right thing to do. But Neu et al. (1998) highlight the difficulty of identifying the strategy adopted by companies for CSR communication, that is, whether the reactive or the proactive orientation is more prevalent.

As far as the second approach is concerned, Tixier (2003) focused on the differences between the *soft* and the *hard* approaches in CSR communication. This author developed a model for distinguishing and comparing the soft vs. the hard approach either of which a firm can adopt to base its CSR communication upon. It concerns the question of whether companies should increase dialogue and talk more about their social duties and about which approach would be more suitable to communicate CSR commitment between a “soft” and more traditional communication or a “hard” mode of communicating involving a massive use of media, new technologies and advertising. The study also identified the key factors of good communication, which are transparency, honesty and proactivity.

In order to be regarded as socially responsible, a company has to make its CSR activities visible and accessible to both internal and external stakeholders (Arvidsson 2009). Morsing and Schultz (2006) underlined the fact that messages regarding corporate ethics and social initiatives have the power to evoke strong positive reactions among stakeholders. Here, the languages and messages adopted for CSR communication are of critical importance, since the linguistic approach used by firms for CSR activity communication gives a clear image of the nature of corporate motivations (Hartman, Rubin & Dhanda 2007; Van Lee et al. 2004; Zadeck 2005).

To communicate their CSR message, firms have several choices, since they can employ a wide range of communication channels, such as sustainability reports, advertising campaigns on television, billboards and the internet (Hartman, Rubin & Dhanda 2007).

The internet is increasingly becoming one of the main tools for CSR information disclosure, as it allows companies to publicize more and better up-to-date information in a way that is less expensive and faster than traditional channels used in the past (Wanderley et al. 2008). It also possesses a particular feature that allows the corporation to communicate with specific stakeholders and obtain their feedback (Branco & Rodrigues 2006). As emphasized by Chaundri and Wang (2007), the internet is gaining ground as a new communication medium that companies can employ to present themselves as being a socially responsible entity. In the last few years, the use of social media for CSR communication has increased. Building on Darus et al. (2013), companies are beginning to explore new and alternative modalities for reporting the activities of their CSR information and they are realizing this process by using corporate web sites to transmit their CSR information to the stakeholders (Frost et al. 2005; Adams & Frost 2006; Branco & Rodrigues 2008; Darus et al. 2013). Wheeler and Elkington (2001), Adam and Frost (2004), Bolivar (2009) and Darus et al. (2013) have also highlighted the advantages of the use of corporate web sites for CSR communication in terms of easy access, low costs of information broadcasting, wider coverage and timeless benefits since information can be updated faster and more easily. Moreover, web-based technologies allow the establishment of a connection among companies, consumers and the society and better favor the access to information, with respect to traditional media (Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013). Nevertheless, according to research conducted by Esrock and Leichty (1999), the main benefits of this “digital revolution” concerns multiple-stakeholder dialogue. Numerous studies have also specified that the use of web tools depends on the structure and the nature of the corporation. In reference to Tagesson et al. (2009), state-owned corporations utilize corporate websites to disseminate social information more than private-owned businesses actually do. Darus et al. (2009, 2013) and Chau and Gray (2010) stated that family-controlled entities are less motivated in the use of the web for CSR dissemination. This is due to a weaker demand for accessibility among this kind of enterprise. Whilst, according to Firth et al. (2007) and Wang et al. (2008), foreign-owned firms seem to be more open to the use of these instruments in a CSR context.

When considering social and environmental web communication studies, it is possible to identify two main streams of research studies on web site information content, characterized by scarce attention to the issues of web communication and research focused on the communication potential of the web. Coupland (2005, 2006) examined how firms utilize corporate web sites to construct their own account

of their CSR activities, legitimizing them to stakeholders, while Cooper (2003) underlined the potential use of web platforms to encourage a stakeholder/corporate relationship although in practice the use of the web by corporations is limited and selective. Bolivar (2009) and Herzig and Godemann (2010) focused their studies on the provision, accessibility, comprehensibility and dialogue capabilities of web tools, particularly stressing the increment concerning the provision of information and dialogue with stakeholders. These contributions concentrate on the benefits of web-based communication from a managerial perspective (Iodhia 2012). Contributions from Cho et al. (2009) have shown that the web has the potential of incrementing users' trust and perception of CSR, since the richness of the web environment can have positive effects on trust.

In this perspective, near to and/or in addition to the use of corporate web sites, social media (and specifically social networks) are effective tools for the communication of CSR strategy. As Etter (2013) stated, social media, as compared to corporate web sites, have greater, more significant potential in terms of interaction with a multitude of stakeholders. The main thing that impedes the generalization of the effect of the use of social media for CSR communication and dissemination of information is the lack of exhaustive and specific literature besides the absence of conclusive results provided by the existing studies (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel 2010; Etter 2013, p. 606).

Social media represent one of the biggest challenges for today's businesses, since they can serve as tools for the dissemination of quality information that can grant velocity, interaction and immediacy (Fernando 2010; Baird & Parasnis 2011; Mangold & Faulds 2009). The main peculiarity of social media that distinguishes them from corporate web sites and traditional channels of communication, is that they are modern ways of interpersonal communication, the main features of which involve more interactivity where users can communicate with each other and where each person can or should be identified. So this channel can also be useful for CSR, since social media involve both mass communication and crowd-sourcing and are able to include the dialogue with a multitude of stakeholders (employees, customers, suppliers communities, organizations, other business, etc.) (Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013).

Moreover, aware of the existing lack in literature concerning the use of social media for businesses, and, more specifically, in the use of these tools for CSR communication, available studies and research convene that social media can be strategic tools for corporate communication (Mangold & Faulds 2009; Fernando 2010; Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel 2010; Baird & Parasnis 2011; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013; Etter 2013). The wise use of internet services such as corporate web sites and social media for CSR communication creates *"an ongoing and interactive process rather than a static annual product"* (Antal et al. 2002; Chaundri & Wang 2007). Specifically, social networks, due to their peculiarities of extensions of interpersonal communication, *"will become more than the message of CSR, it will become the soul of CSR and, therefore, be embedded as part of the brand in its message"* (Capriotti 2011; Briones, et al. 2011; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013, p. 61). The web environment provides numerous advantages as compared to traditional ways of communication, among which are the following: i) information can be updated on the web at any point in time as well as in real time; ii) the web presents various features including graphics, animation, multimedia, and images which, besides providing hints for communication, can make the discussion of issues more appealing; iii) the variety of language used through the web makes web-based tools more direct and interactive; iv) it provides relevant features such as customization and alerts that can serve as personal sources for communication; and v) it is possible to involve a variety of stakeholders in the communication (Wheeler & Elkington 2001; Adams & Frost 2004; Bolivar 2009; Herzig & Godemann 2010; Isenmann & Lenz 2001, 2002; Isenmann 2004; Iodhia 2012, p. 75). Jucan and DolfBaier (2012) identified additional benefits that firms can obtain by applying new technologies to social and environmental issues such as easy access to information, lowering costs and increasing productivity, creating new patterns, reducing the demand for offices and retailing spaces, producing changes in transport and energy consumption, and providing new digital collaboration, thus achieving major optimization of production and efficiency (Juncan & DolfBaier 2012).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Aim

This research aims to investigate the role of interactive technologies for CSR communication. Specifically, this work seeks to highlight how firms use the web sites and the new interactive technologies (social media, mobile application, blogs, etc.) in their CSR communication practices.

Methodology

The work is based on a qualitative research method in which we combine the case study method (Yin, 2002) with a netnography approach (Kozinets 2010). The netnography approach (Kozinets 1999, 2002) is particularly suitable for investigating and collecting data in the web environment without involving any direct influence of the researcher (Kozinets 2006). The case study method (Yin 2002) seeks to get data from the business sector. Case studies permit a substantial reduction of the extent of the subjectivity of the researcher, since it allows the researcher to describe business realities in order to distinguish business protagonists' facts and opinions as well as their comments (Mari 1994). Moreover, this approach is particularly useful for those studies that are, at the same time, explanatory, explorative and descriptive, as is the case in our work.

The combined case study and netnography method strengthens the trustworthiness of the research by allowing the availability of information with differing levels of depth. In this perspective, netnography completes the single case-based study, although the latter is a stand-alone method with respect to the various types of research (Yin 2002).

We analyzed three cases of excellence for CSR communication through the web: the Hera Group, Telecom Italia and Eni. Indeed, according to CSR Online Awards 2012, these firms are the three leading Italian companies for the use of new interactive technologies to communicate social and environmental issues. This award, established by Lundquist in collaboration with the economic and financial daily "Il Sole 24 Ore", reports the state of the art of CSR online communication in Italy, evaluating the way that companies use their corporate website and related digital properties to communicate corporate responsibility and sustainability information and to engage in dialogue with stakeholders.

Data Collection

Research activity was carried out between February and June 2014. Data was collected in three phases. The first phase concerned the analysis of the web-sites and non-participant observation of the main social pages created by three firms on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Flickr, Slideshare, You Tube, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Instagram. The aim of this research stage was to better understand the CSR activities realized and communicated by firms through the use of different communication tools (website, social network, mobile application, blog, etc). In this way we investigated the individual firms' commitment to CSR issues through the use of different tools for the communication of activities, projects, etc.

The second phase was based both on primary and secondary data. Secondary data came from related articles, documents and publications available through the web and other sources. Primary data were gathered through direct semi-structured interviews with CSR managers of the investigated firms. Questions were consistent with the purpose of the paper, and concerned the following three main areas of investigation: i) the importance for businesses to communicate their own CSR activities; ii) the role of new interactive technologies in enabling firms to do this; and iii) the use of one-way (websites) and two-way communication tools (such as social media, mobile application, blogs, etc.) for CSR issues.

Finally, the third phase was focused on data analysis to understand the actual role of new technologies in the firms' CSR communication strategies. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Hera Group

Hera is Italy's leading multi-utility company committed to the improvement of the quality of services to citizens in essential sectors such as energy, water and environmental services.

A guiding principle for the Hera Group is social and environmental responsibility. It is committed to combining the creation of economic and social value with satisfying the legitimate expectations of all those with whom it has dealings—customers employees, shareholders, suppliers, institutions and local communities. It considers compliance with the principles of social responsibility a key element in its efforts toward sustainable development. For this Group, transparency plays a key role as a means conducive to dialogue with stakeholders and creates an atmosphere consonant to meeting the needs for information and knowledge relative to the economic, social and environmental impacts of corporate activities.

The web environment--and specifically corporate web site and social pages--enable the firm to communicate about its own social and environmental commitment. The corporate web site is not only a useful tool for diffusing information and knowledge on the corporate mission and values, policy, code of ethics, guidelines, CSR timeline, ethical indexes and strategic CSR priorities.

It is a real space of environmental education thanks to the use of several tools, such as reports, research results, videos and newsletters. In this space, the information on awards, news and events is constantly updated.

Social pages, as well as the corporate web site, allow the dissemination of information on activities, projects and goals of the firm. Main social pages used by firms in general are LinkedIn, You Tube, Pinterest, Flickr, Slideshare and Google+ (Table 1).

Table 1 - Main social pages of Hera Group

Social Pages	Figures
LinkedIn	5 services, 2 recommendations, 7.408 followers
You Tube	149 subscriptions, 172.662 visualizations
Pinterest	14 walls, 132 pins, 1 like, 44 followers, 31 following
Flickr	172 pictures, 6 following, 1 group
Slideshare	118 slideshares, 10 followers, 0 following, 98 tags
Google+	in the circle of 4 people

Telecom Italia

Telecom Italia is the leading company in the Italian telecommunication sector. Its activity covers all telecommunication-related services such as fixed and mobile (TIM) telephony, internet, digital contents, cloud services, etc.

To communicate its CSR commitment, Telecom Italia uses a corporate web site, several social pages and mobile apps.

The sustainability section on the corporate web site, is a space where the company illustrates its firm's strategy, corporate governing systems, codes and policies, certifications, international standards, relationships with international relations, sustainability indicators, relations with different stakeholders, strategies on financial investments for sustainability issues and sustainability reports. News and events are constantly updated, a FAQ section with questions about the sustainable commitment of Telecom Italia and a section reserved for sustainability contacts is provided.

The corporate web site is a useful tool for presenting the firm's projects to the community.

In addition to the corporate web site, Telecom uses social media and social networks to communicate with its own stakeholders on projects and activities (such as charity activities). It manages nine social pages: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Flickr, Slideshare, Pinterest, You Tube, LinkedIn and Instagram (Table 2).

Table 2 - Main social pages of Telecom Italia

Social Pages	Figures
Facebook	1.667 people registered, 168.661 likes and more than 200 messages posted by the firm
Twitter	13.200 tweets, 2.068 following and 121.00 followers
Google+	4.654 followers, 2.015 people in the circle and in the circle of 2.256 people
Flickr	1.778 pictures, 5 followers and 1 group
Slideshare	101 slideshares, 46 followers, 1 following, 62 tags
Pinterest	18 walls, 1.015 pins, 80 likes, 896 followers and 261 following
You Tube	1.435 subscriptions and 1.032.397 visualizations
LinkedIn	4 services, 23 recommendations and 41.397 followers
Instagram	569 photos, 2.099 followers and 43 following

As evidenced by supporting data, Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and You Tube are the principal social pages for Telecom in terms of subscriptions and followers.

As far as mobile applications are concerned, Telecom Italia provides a green app called “Respect”. This application is a game that allows people to measure their own daily impact on the environment.

Eni

Eni is one of the largest integrated energy companies in the world, operating in the sectors of oil and gas exploration and production, international gas transportation, power generation, refining and marketing, chemicals and oilfield services. It employs about 82.300 people in more than 85 countries.

The guiding principles for Eni are correctness, transparency, honesty and integrity. Eni adopts the highest standards and employs international guidelines in the management of its activities in all the contexts in which it operates. It considers sustainability to be a driving force in the ongoing process of continuous improvement that guarantees results over time, while reinforcing its business performance and reputation. Eni is committed to promoting its principles among its stakeholders and interacting continuously with them. Clear dialogue with each of them is an important aspect of the company’s way of operating. The web is a strategic element for the firm’s communication.

The website holds much updated information on projects for the defense of human rights, the environment and for the local developmental, quality control and anti-corruption policies, besides current events, activities, reports, studies and research.

Social pages support and integrate the issues communicated through the website. Among nine social pages, Facebook, Twitter and You Tube have the greatest impact in terms of subscriptions and followers (Table 3).

Table 3 - Main social pages of Eni

Social Pages	Figures
Facebook	4 pages with a total of 8.269 dialoging users, 229.400 likes and several messages posted by the firm since 2008
Twitter	1.566 tweets, 352 followings, 10.400 followers
Google+	in the circle of 16 people
Flickr	1.143 pictures
Slideshare	67 slideshares, 66 followers, 1 following, 120 tags
Pinterest	6 walls, 288 pins, 2 likes, 636 followers and 308 following
You Tube	2.136 subscriptions, 15.731.787 visualizations
LinkedIn	7 products, 29 recommendations, 106.465 followers
Instagram	2 pages with a total of 441 posts, 1.119 followers and 66 followings

As far as mobile application is concerned , Eni provides five apps: Eni corporate, Eninelmondo, Black and white, World Energy and Economic Atlas, and EniSandArtist. These applications are used to cover different themes and issues, including social and sustainable questions.

4. FINDINGS

All the companies in our study recognized the importance of communicating their CSR activities to their public. Each has been communicating about its own social and environmental commitment for many years, although the reasons for this communication are different.

“[Our choice derived] from the strong will of top management”.

Filippo Bocchi – CSR director of Hera Group

“Telecom Italia is a company that lives in an ecosystem of European and international countries. It is a company that moves with the times. To a certain extent, by the end of the 1990s, the necessity to focus mainly on environmental issues emerged. (...) It is both a proactive and reactive approach at the same time. Proactive because we always try to be ahead in what we do”.

Alessandro Bastoni – CSR institutional, web and social manager of Telecom Italia.

“It is a strategic choice in order to improve stakeholder dialogue”.

Domenica Di Donato – Sustainability planning, reporting and professional family manager of Eni.

Moreover, as indicated by Alessandro Bastoni, of Telecom Italia, companies favor the creation of shared values for stakeholders.

“We are moving from the traditional concept of corporate social responsibility, that there has been up to now, to a concept of shared values, and then on to corporate shared value. So we are substantially moving from CSR to [Corporate Shared Value] CSV, which, today, is the maximum evolution of corporate social and environmental responsibility, and is based on the concept that all corporate initiatives must create shared values for stakeholders”.

The knowledge of the increasing importance of the communication of a firm's CSR is emerging from the interviews, and for varying reasons (e.g. being competitive in both EU and global spheres, shared value creation, business and financial motivations).

"It is very important for companies of any type, especially for those companies that have a relevant social impact or that are service companies or companies that have significant environmental impact".

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

"It is very important for different reasons. First of all because it is increasingly important for a large company that wants to compete not only within the national sphere but also on the European and international markets. It is fundamental to be included in sustainability indices (e.g. Dow Jones). (...) There is also a business motivation, a financial motivation (...) The commitment for shared value creation for stakeholders is certainly a lever for business improvement for both cost reduction and potential creation of new value".

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

"It is important today for a company to communicate its own social and environmental commitment for the long term creation of sustainable value".

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

The main beneficiaries of CSR communication are identified by companies as being in different stakeholder categories (both internal and external stakeholders).

"[The beneficiaries of CSR communication are] stakeholders in general but we certainly have a strong commitment to shareholders and, at the same time, to citizens, clients, and employees. We also communicate a lot inside the company. The beneficiaries of this communication are both internal and external stakeholders".

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

"[The beneficiaries of CSR communication are] all stakeholders, from clients, to employees, to suppliers, to SMEs that are in contact with Telecom Italia, to institutions, to the community in a broad sense, then to the nation, just to name a few. We monitor eight stakeholder typologies. For each one of them we made engagement policies, then involvement and relationship policies that are targeted, with specific projects. Of course we have 'erga omnes' projects and projects that are strictly targeted for different stakeholders".

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

"The principal beneficiaries of social and environmental communication are different typologies of stakeholders".

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

In order to communicate their own social and environmental commitment, companies use both traditional and innovative communication channels:

"We adopt booklets, sustainability reports or specific reports that meet the specific needs of our stakeholders. We also have brochures, and flyers. Billboards are not so much used any more".

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

"We increasingly tend to favor two great forms of communication and tools. On one hand we have off-line tools which are mainly events. We organize events targeted to specific categories of stakeholders. [On the other hand] we are increasing the use of our corporate web site (telecomitalia.it) with specialized sections on sustainability

issues, both through the sustainability report, which is primarily electronic, and then through the web using the new channels, such as social media. Intranet is very important for internal stakeholders. (...) [Other tools are] newsletters, videocommunication, case histories and blogs”.

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

Among the traditional communication tools we have the sustainability report, and the integrated report. Among the innovative communication tools we use the website and social media. We currently do not use mobile apps [for CSR issues].

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

Moreover, traditional communication tools are often rethought in order to enhance their usefulness as is the case for the Hera Group, which uses the invoice in a new way:

“We also use invoice to communicate about social responsibility activities. There is a section in the invoice or we attach the material to the invoice. The invoice is both electronic and printed”.

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

Concerning social media, Telecom Italia and Eni use these in addition to and in support of the corporate web site, while the Hera Group prefers the website, because it does not consider social networks useful for issues related to CSR communication.

“We do not use social networks much. We have not activated them. (...) And speaking of social networks, we still have not decided which strategy to adopt. I have never seen the employment of social networks by companies which regard it as a useful tool for communicating CSR activities as business-related. I see it as a façade tool. In this case I retain them to be useful for the communication of specific projects concerning CSR, but not for general CSR communication”.

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

As the quotes reveal, among the investigated firms, Telecom Italia is the one that uses social media the most. The website is the main means for CSR communication while social networks are conceptualized as an integration.

“Certainly the web is the main tool. It is the point where people can consult all information available and where we can better organize information targeted to stakeholders. About social media, they serve as a platform since they can do what the web lacks: communication and interaction. Social media, integrated with the web, can extend the reach of people who do not use the web but do use social media (e.g. young people)”.

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

Eni also considers interactive technologies to be useful tools for communication, interaction and reaching new targets.

“Thanks to the integration of new technologies, we are getting to a larger target of people. In addition, new technologies offer the possibility to interact with stakeholders. Another result is the possibility of updating contents in real time”.

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

Benefits gained from the application of new technologies for CSR communication are different and various for firms.

“An advantage is rapidity, the fact that we can reach our audiences in real time. This is bidirectional of course, since we have also used the web for acknowledgments on our activity. We have activated a chat on sustainability issues. (...) Another advantage is

transparency and the availability of our activities. (...) for reputational purposes. We are recognized as a firm that is also committed on that front: to make information transparent and communicate it with rapidity through a channel available to everyone”.

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

“One of the foremost advantages is that we can reach our stakeholders everywhere and at every moment and, most of all, we can offer very structured information. (...) Then we have environmental advantages, since the fact of avoiding the use of paper and ink is in respect of the environment. We have also cost reductions. (...) We have learnt to use those tools and to communicate in an efficient way. Furthermore, we have had tangible results, since Telecom Italia is a leader concerning the use of online tools and is ranked in the first three positions in European classification.(...) There has been an improvement of our reputation on web”.

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

“The main benefits and advantages of the use of the new communication tools concern the reaching of new targets (e.g. NGOs, United Nations Organizations, local institutions, local and regional authorities, clients, other companies, competitors, etc.). (...) Moreover, new technologies offer the possibility to interact with stakeholders and to update contents in real time”.

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

Firms have also expressed their willingness to continue using and improving the use of web-based tools, in order to guarantee a more continuative and interactive dialogue with all stakeholders.

“In the future we will simply continue to do as we are doing. Certainly, we should implement the use of the web rather than materialize our documents. We still print some types of information. We do not intend to completely annul the use of the printed word but, really, the web is the main communication channel today, the one most used. Another objective is to make information more navigable with a synthesis or in-depth content. We intend to make communication that is above all synthetic and then also make in-depth information available for those who want to investigate specific issues”.

Filippo Bocchi (Hera Group)

“Our improvements in this field are continuous. We adopt a total quality model in what we do concerning communication. First of all, we listen, then we analyze, then we act, we gauge our actions and the relative gap and finally we make an iterative process of improvement. This is our methodology. Furthermore, we are going to integrate a specific management for CSR issues with a larger budget and greater internal visibility. We expect an improvement of this CSR activity over the next three years”.

Alessandro Bastoni (Telecom Italia)

“For the future, the company intends to manage communication through the integrated use of different communication tools, using and diversifying all of them on the basis of targets. We intend to make our web site more interactive and to have a more continuative dialogue with stakeholders”.

Domenica Di Donato (Eni)

5. CONCLUSION

Corporate social responsibility and sustainability are relevant topics for today's businesses which have to answer for their actions to stakeholders and to society (Asongu 2007; Arnone, Ferauge & Pozniak 2011). CSR is of basic importance for companies, since it influences image, reputation and stakeholder relations (Etter 2013). Hence, firms are particularly careful to communicate their own social and environmental activities to stakeholders in order to respond to ethical standards, build corporate reputation and create value (Capriotti & Moreno 2007). Telecom has underlined how necessary it is for all these companies that compete in European and international spheres to make and communicate their own CSR commitment. The Hera Group also recognized this commitment, "especially for those companies that have a relevant social and environmental impact".

This research study has provided examples of how firms are increasingly aware of the importance of CSR and related issues, how much they care about CSR communication with stakeholders and how they use different tools for this purpose (both traditional and innovative channels). The results confirm that the use of internet and web-based tools by companies is growing year by year (Wanderley et al. 2008; Chaundri & Wang 2007). Moreover, businesses are beginning to use these tools to communicate their social and environmental activities to stakeholders too (Harmoni 2012). Inside the broad category of web-based platforms, this work has evidenced that the corporate website is the main communication tool for firms since it allows better organization, management and dissemination of information. Hand-in-hand with the use of web sites, firms are also beginning to implement social media and mobile apps to communicate CSR information, activities and projects (Antal et al. 2002; Chaundri & Wang 2007; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013). As the study revealed, these social pages and applications are mainly used in order to support and integrate the issues communicated through the web site. In addition, they allow better communication and interaction as well as low costs, velocity, immediacy and the reaching of new targets (Fernando 2010; Baird & Parasnis 2011; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013; Etter 2013). According to Alessandro Bastoni of Telecom Italia, responsible for the CSR institutional, web and social sectors, social media *"can do what the web lacks: communication and interaction"*. For Eni, interactive technologies enable firms to reach new targets and categories of people giving rise to new opportunities.

However, as emerged from the interview with Filippo Bocchi, CSR director of the Hera Group, interactive technologies are not perceived as useful tools related to CSR and sustainability: *"I have never seen the employment of social networks by companies which regard it as a useful tool for communicating CSR activities as business-related. I see it as a façade tool"*. Eni stressed how each communication tool (both traditional and innovative) needs to be used in a complementary way. The firm does not give priority to a specific tool over the others. As Domenica di Donato, responsible for sustainability planning, reporting and professional family of Eni argued: *"For the future the company intends to manage communication through the integrated use of different communication tools"*.

The whole web environment is today's main channel for corporate communication and this process has involved CSR and sustainability issues too (Harmoni 2012). However, the web has not "killed" traditional channels for communication, since companies tend to use both tools (off-line and on-line). Actually, they adopt a "communication-mix strategy" in which traditional and innovative channels for communication (and CSR communication) are used in a complementary and integrated way.

6. IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the role of new interactive technologies for the communication of the social and environmental responsibilities of firms.

First, we recognized the key importance of the traditional communication tools for CSR communication despite the degree of diffusion of new technologies available for firms. Traditional tools such as reports, brochures, flyers, bill posting, advertising, and events continue to be the predominant means used by companies for the communication of CSR practices. However, these tools

are reviewed and redesigned in the light of new opportunities offered by the web for the dissemination of information. Traditional tools, such as reports, take on a new connotation becoming real tools for social and environmental education always available for stakeholders.

Second, among the new interactive tools offered by the web, the website plays a key role in a firm's communication which is aiming to achieve complete, structured, and organized communication. Therefore, the website is the main communication tool for a firm's social and environmental commitment.

Third, new interactive technologies (social media, mobile applications, blogs, videos, etc..) have strong potential for companies because they allow them to break the boundaries providing interaction and ongoing dialogue between businesses and their stakeholders. These tools integrate and support other communication means used by firms for CSR dissemination.

From a managerial perspective, companies are more and more aware of the impact of their activities on sustainable development (Arnone et al. 2011). They are brought to communicate more on their implemented sustainable activities in order to facilitate dialogue and meet the expectations of their stakeholders.

The implementation of proactive CSR communication that goes beyond the legal constraints is becoming a major goal for companies. Besides the necessity of answering the requirements of the environment, CSR communication can contribute to improve the firm's image, to amplify the positive effects of a good reputation (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen 2010), and to promote and strengthen its relationship with its stakeholders.

Internet appears to be the most useful communication channel for firms to broadcast information concerning their responsible practices (Wanderley et al. 2008).

It offers numerous advantages such as the disclosure of more information at a lower cost and in a more reduced time frame, or the opportunity to reach new targets, especially young people, institutions, NGOs, and other companies. While it is important to keep existing customers, it is also imperative to attract a totally new customer base (Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas 2013) and to enhance their consciousness and awareness on these topics. Interactive technologies allow more dialogue with stakeholders favoring their engagement and education in CSR topics more quickly and more cheaply. Thus, corporate website and interactive technologies should be used in an integrated way to ensure a greater spread of information. Only in this way will it be possible to make CSR issues more pervasive, appealing and interactive.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are limitations to this study that suggest opportunities for future research. First, the number of firms contacted; the study examines a sample of three companies that leads to a problem of generalizability. Moreover, it focuses on a specific geographical area (Italy). In addition, our research does not allow the application of the findings to the whole business context. It reports the results of ongoing research, the progress of which is directed towards expanding the sample of firms analyzed and deepening the findings reached with the interviews presented in this article.

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