CSR and the need to connect: a theoretical reflection with implications for practice

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Introduction

Professional organizations arise and exist insofar as they have a function in their environment. This function determines the identity and boundaries of the organization (this is us, this is what we do, and this is what we are not and what we do not). In addition, organizations are supposed to have a CSR program that guarantees them to act in an ethical sound way and to effectively connect to the environment that is more and more asking organizations to take their responsibility. Such effectively connecting to the environment asks for two-sided communication, given shape by both formal and informal communication within the organization as well as between the organization and important relation groups in the environment (Argyris, 1990; Ford and Ford, 1995; Ford, 1999; Stacey, 2001; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Baker, 2010). Although this is widely agreed - both among scientists studying issues related to organizational change and practitioners in communication - reality confronts us with a different picture: most communication professionals are mainly focusing on one sided sending of formal messages, resulting in an endless stream of communication means in the form of press releases, newsletters, annual reports, brochures and advertising that is spread out over the world. The lack of real connection by means of two-sided communication in the form of formal and informal discussions, dialogues and conversations may explain why so many efforts to organizational change fail (Boonstra, 2000)

In this conceptual contribution we aim to understand why it is so difficult to interact. We will explore the issue with the help of theoretical concepts related to self-reference and autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela, 1992; Luhmann, 1990; Morgan, 1998). Next the concept of listening as a tool to connect will be explored which helps us to deepen our insight in the construction of stories for 1) making sense and 2) connecting to others. Finally, the results of our journey will be summarized in the conclusion and discussed with regard to their relevance for practitioners who aim for the development and implementation of a sound CSR program of organizations.

Selfreferentiality, autopoiesis and the ordering of discourses

As said, organizations should constantly adjust their identity and boundaries in order to stay in tune with their ever-changing environment. Adjusting, however, is not easy. This can be explained with the help of the concepts of self-reference and autopoiesis (Luhmann, 1990).

Self-reference points at the inclination of people and organizations to view their environment through a completely personal idea of what is important and what is not (Luhmann, 1990; Morgan, 1998). It is impossible to take into account all signals in the environment. Therefore we select information of which we think we need it to keep position in our environment. Such selection contributes to the development of the identity and boundaries of an organization and to the development of a specific culture with specific values, norms and perspectives on what is important and what not. Gradually people take these perspectives for granted. They become uncontested realities that are confirmed and reproduced in future interactions (Ford, 1999). The concept of framing, in these days very popular in both communication theory and practice, makes sense here. Framing starts from the idea that conversations are both the process through which we construct reality and the product of that construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1984; Berquist, 1993; Ford, 1999). This dual nature of conversations can be connected to Giddens (1984) notion of 'duality of structure'. Giddens (1984) speaks of

the emergence of change in terms of a gradual process of 'structuration' that takes place in everyday interaction. Frames and framing play decisive roles in such processes.

Although not always consciously, but nevertheless actively, people construct specific frames in interaction. By framing events, developments, and/or phenomena in interaction, people are doing something or, in other words, become active agents (Frake, 1977). Out of innumerable possible descriptions in our conversations we choose specific descriptions of reality in order to accomplish goals through interaction in a specific context. Examples of such goals are constructing credibility, constructing a desired identity, shifting responsibility, realizing a specific interest, accusing people, complimenting people, entertaining people, et-cetera. Generally speaking, such goals have to do with influencing the content, the interaction-process, and/or the relationship with the actor(s) involved (Aarts and Van Woerkum, 2006; Dewulf et al., 2009).

Autopoiesis

Analyzing frame construction in interaction shows that, related to whatever issue, people, without being aware, see certain things while others remain invisible. What we tend to see is what is contributing to the reproduction of our existing identity and culture. The theory of autopoiesis, as developed by Francisco Maturana and Humberto Varela (Maturana and Varela, 1990; see also Maturana, 1999) makes clear that this inclination to reproduce our identity and culture is extremely strong by nature. These Chilean biologists tried to understand what living systems distinguish from non-living systems. According to them living systems are characterized by their autonomy to produce and reproduce their components, an 'autopoiesis' that is realized by organizing processes in a circular way. Autopoiesis literally means 'self-creation' (from the Greek *auto:* self, and *poises:* creation). A living cell, for instance, is an autopoietic system because the processes the system consists of are connected in a circle that reproduces itself as a whole. Living systems are thus characterized by three principal features: autonomy, circularity, and self-reference (Maturana and Varela, 1988; Morgan, 1998). Autopoietic systems are also referred to as self-organizing systems, construed in chains of interactions within the system and characterized by the fact that causes and effects cannot be mapped linearly. Instead, similar causes can have different effects and different causes may result in

similar effects. The well known example of the butterfly flapping his wings in Japan and causing a hurricane in New York is often used to explain that little causes may have big consequences and the other way around: big causes may not have any effect at all. Not so much causality determines the course of things as the confluence of events at a certain point in time (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984; Fuchs, 2003; Burnes, 2005). In other words, it is the specific and ever-changing context that is the deciding factor. This is easily overlooked, because retrospectively we tend to explain developments by constructing clear and unambiguous cause-consequence chains (c came from b, b from a) by not paying attention anymore to ambiguity and co-incidences that are important characteristics of most development processes (Elias, 1970). In other words, when looking at the future b is just one of the possible transformations of a.

The autopoiesis theory as developed by Maturana and Varela provides us with two important insights: 1) individual organisms do not have an overview of the system they are part of, and 2) individual organisms are not simply strands in the great pre-given web of life, but instead are active agents who bring forth and enact the world. As a result, development and change are in many cases the unplanned consequence of individually and/or collectively planned actions of actors that physically and socially try to survive and therefore tend to reproduce their existing identity (Blok, 2001; see also Esbjörn-Hargens, 2009; Scharmer, 2007).

Autopoiesis and social systems
The autopoiesis theory of Maturana and Varela has been picked up by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995) who elaborated the idea for social systems, in other words, for people and their organisations. Social systems like societies and organizations also consist of in principal closed subsystems that try to survive and while doing so disturb each other. Social systems as well continuously reproduce themselves, not as a physical system, but as a system of meaning. Through communication meanings and perspectives are shared within the subsystem that we call an interpretive community, a concept that was first coined by Fish who defines an interpretive community as a group of like-minded individuals who develop similar assumptions about how things should be understood (Fish, 1980; Pepper, 1995). In Fish's words: "It is interpretive communities,

rather than either text or reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features" (Fish, 1980: 14). In short, interpretive communities, also called speech communities, discourse communities, symbol-sharing communities and even communities of practice, refer to groups of people who share understandings of ideas and language (Yanow, 1999).

Ordering through discourse

The inclination to self-reference and autopoiesis makes most people feel comfortable with situations they are familiar with, as well as with people who have similar backgrounds and opinions. These are the people they prefer to talk with. This strengthens the development of a dominant discourse, consisting of recognizable and coherent conversation patterns that tend to exclude other discourses and instead reproduce and reinforce themselves in conversations within the 'we' group. These conversations are characterized by a structural lack of critical reflection on the existing opinions, a lack of linking up to the wider environment, and a lack of change mindedness. Instead groupthink (Janis, 1982; Haslam, 2001) may develop, especially in the face of perceived threat (e.g change, suggested by others), organized in the conversations between people within such a closed system. Groupthink refers to the process by which "group members of any small cohesive group tend to maintain esprit de corps by unconsciously developing a number of shared illusions and related norms that interfere with critical thinking and reality testing" (Janis, 1982: 35). Groupthink is developed in the context of what Ford et al (2002) call ongoing background conversations that shape the world.

According to autopoiesis theory the psychological concept of selective perception does not sufficiently explain how people deal with information from outside. People not only select information from the wider context, they actively reconstruct information in order to make it suitable to their own system. Signals, that may be chaotic or threatening and thus may create chaos in the system, are cognitively reconstructed to 'manneable' non-threatening information that reproduces the own reality. The context is, so to speak eaten by the system and as such rendered harmless at the short term. A sort of pseudo order is created that, however, in the end will be dysfunctional in a context that is constantly changing. A tipping point towards collapsing will come closer and closer.

From the perspective of autopoiesis and self reference it becomes obvious that people and their organizations have a strong inclination to reproduce their identity and limits rather than adapting them. When potentially relevant signals from the environment do not elicit a reaction, the result will be that, at a certain point, the organization, since it does not adapt to its environment loses its function, because the environment does change constantly. If not adapting it is the organization that makes itself subordinate to its environment and, sooner or later, will probably collapse.

Self-referential closed systems should break their self-referentiality, open themselves for the wider context and be sensitive for information from outside. However, following autopoiesis theory communication between two social systems is inherently problematic as all social systems involved will deal with information and context in an autopoietic way. At the same time communication is the only instrument to create a common base for communication: a minimum domain of common interpretation and possibilities to interact. Here we find the main function of strategic communication of organisations: by means of communication the natural inclination to autopoiesis should be stopped, and instead functional connections with relevant actors in the environment should be constructed and maintained. Such is supported by overcoming the dichotomy between 'actors' and 'structure', as suggested by Giddens with his structuration theory that puts central the mediation between actors' agency and the structures they produce, reproduce and / or transform (Giddens, 1984; Hajer and Laws, 2005; Fuchs, 2003; Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011). Communication and social interactions exist between individuals as a connecting mechanism that enables the spontaneous development of social structures, expressed in dominant discourses (Fuchs, 2003). When conceiving social structures as "… unities of social relationships that take place in and through interaction and communication and social forms such as rules and resources" (idem, 2003: 163), these can also be understood as processes of ordering through discourses, narratives, storylines or frames (Hajer and Laws, 2005).

Differently from instrumental communication that provides carefully constructed formal messages as visible means to reach well-defined goals, strategic communication of organizations, mainly concerns itself with social processes. One could think of building

and maintaining relationships, identifying sensitivities, inspiring trust, dealing with unexpected circumstances, co-creating stories with relevant relation groups, with the final aim of constructing an interpretive community of relevant stakeholders. These are substantially different activities than those belonging to instrumental communication. Also the means are different: as the main aim of strategic communication is to connect people both within the organisation and between the organisation and the environment, the most important means are different forms of interaction. A CSR policy that has been developed by means of strategic communication is probably experienced as authentic and relevant. Such CSR policy will appear in the stories both employees of an organization and external stakeholders share.

What conversations and stories can add

As said before, organizations can be considered as networks constituted in and by conversations (Ford, 1999). In conversations, people construe stories about the world around them, stories in which we can find contexts and meanings insofar as the people themselves consider them to be important. Following Rappaport (1995) stories can be defined as "descriptions of events over time" (Rappaport, 1995: 803). Stories usually have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Telling stories is a deeply rooted human nature. As long as people are living together they exchange stories. Even in our rational and technological society, stories are continuously constructed, told, read and lived. What is it that is so special about stories? First of al, stories are extremely helpful for making our lives bearable. It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle who stated that good stories have a beneficial, purifying effect on listeners. Aristotle calls this effect 'catharsis'. Stories help us to make sense of the world, how to understand events and phenomena, and how to deal with these in order to survive socially and physically. Stories tell about our origins, our roots, and provide us with guideline how to live our lives, as religions do, which are, in fact consist great collections of stories. Moreover, via stories we exchange in conversations we get socialized and via

stories cultures arise. In short, stories tell us about the world, including how we should behave in it.

Secondly, with the stories we share in our conversations, we try to achieve substantive goals and, maybe even more importantly, we regulate our appearance (Goffman 1959). People are both individual and social beings and this also goes for their identity: we want to be unique, distinguish ourselves, maybe even be better than others, but we also want to matter in a social sense, belong somewhere, feel connected with others (Tannen, 1990; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Stories help us to feel we make a difference. To be a person is to have a story to tell, Isak Dinesen, the Danish author of the famous novel 'Out of Africa' said. The fact that we like to hear wonderful or exciting stories and maybe like even more telling them or passing them on ourselves, contributes to the continual care about our identity. This is a fundamental human need that we cannot organize in any other way than in interaction with others. After all, there is no I without you or he/she, no we without they. Stories help to connect to others and are thus essential to group formation and development (Bate, 2004). As compared to abstract, analytic, complete, 'objective', direct, information provided by numbers and figures, stories are concrete, subjective, indirect, lively, providing examples and details, and at the same time broad and unfinished, making it easy for listeners to get involved, leaving space for making it their own story.

Thirdly, stories offer room for both the general and the unique case. Stories transcend the discrepancies between contextual and experimental science. Moreover, stories remove the dichotomy between reason and emotion, between myth and reality, between science and daily life, between facts and meanings, and between identification and distance. Stories, in short, fill the space that we cannot measure, because suitable instruments are not available and that is therefore neglected. By filling this gap stories connect parts that have artificially been divided for the sake of making the world less complex, more knowable, researchable and controllable. As Bate argues: stories help to find a place for the *me* in the *us,* and the us in the me (Bate, 2004).

Whether or not stories are based on concrete personal experiences, the narrator and listener enter the realm of the imagination together and thus get connected (Baker, 2010). The narrator uses his story to tell what it is that he finds important, or what he

thinks the listener may find important, but the listener is ultimately the one who gives the story meaning and will, in a following version, repeat, add and omit. In this way, stories are always under construction: depending on the specific situation, they are produced, reproduced and transformed. Changes take place through these stories. In other words, not only do we talk about reality in conversations, but we do something with reality as we talk about it (Te Molder & Potter 2005). Organizational change can thus be considered as shifting conversations (Ford, 1999). For studying change we should thus study the stories that people share over time..

That stories are not only the carriers but also the drivers of change makes them a valuable communication strategy (Bate, 2004; idem, 2005; Boje, 1995; Bailey, 2004). Attempts at influencing people – whether it is a mass-communication campaign or a well-meant personal advice – are only effective if they are reflected by the conversations that people hold with each other. In general, people are much easier convinced by reasons they discovered and uttered themselves than by reasons that have been pushed by others, as the philosopher Blaise Pascal already mentioned a few centuries ago. Stories invite people to connect to their own stories. This may be the reason why stories better convince than facts and numbers do (Martin and Presse, 1983).

Not surprisingly organisations increasingly pay attention to stories and storytelling for change. Organizations benefit immensely from a good corporate story, an attractive and convincing narration about mission and ambition, anchored in the organization, which tells itself over and over because it easily suits various contexts, both within and outside the organization (Van Woerkum, 2003; van Riel 2005). Such corporate story connects external and internal communication as well as formal and informal communication of an organization. Via stories not only the communication unit, but the organisation as a whole becomes an effective communicator. CSR policies that have been developed by means of storytelling and story-sharing will be adopted, not only as window-dressing by professional communicators, but as an authentic and serious part of the identity of the organization by all employees.

Revisiting communication

Accepting the idea of sharing stories as meaningful for practice in the domain of organizational communication by means of which CSR policies are developed implies that we should start revisiting the way communication is usually conceptualized. Bringing in context and interaction creates the necessity for a broader view of communication that fits in with the way we communicate with each other in daily life. Thinking in terms of individual senders and receivers, messages and channels, misses the target when our ambitions with communication concern optimal adaptation to our environment by means of connecting conversations (Van Woerkum and Aarts, 2008). In a broader view of communication, the interactions between people and groups of people are the unit of analysis. It is the mutual interdependence between people and the way in which this is constructed in interaction that ultimately determines the course of things. Whether it is a marriage, an economic crisis or the image of an organization, structures and changes cannot be understood or explained by the (communication) behaviour of an involved individual (Elias, 1978). People's activities and behaviours must therefore be understood and explained in terms of the social bonds they have formed by means of interaction. In the words of Norbert Elias:

> From this intertwining, from the interdependence of people comes an order of a very specific nature, an order that is more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of each individual person that forms a part of the entwinement (Elias 1982: 240).

The essence of a team sport illustrates what we mean. Take football: there are rules and regulations and individual talents, but the course of the game is ultimately determined by the interaction between the players at the moment that the game is played. The same holds true for a sound CSR policy.

The emphasis on conversations as the source and carrier of change stands in sharp contrast to the tendency to plan in terms of goal/means that characterizes our society and in which many organizations still seem, or maybe are required, to believe – evidence of which is their urge to send. It is high time to start applying the alternative planning

models that have now been developed (Whittington 2001; Stacey & Griffin 2005; Stacey 2001). The essence of these models is that they encompass context and therefore also accept a bigger or smaller amount of unpredictability.

Our view on communication in relation to change and planning makes clear, once again, that there are no recipes or methodologies for strategic communication in relation to the development of CSR policies, nor are there guarantees of success. However, as Elias argues, if we consistently take dynamics and relative unpredictability as our basis, we are better able to act consciously and respond to specific contexts more adequately (Elias, 1970). In other words, we can become better planners if we take into account our limited ability to plan. A good strategist is like a coach who follows a game closely, looks at what the players are doing and, based on that, gives instructions for moments at which action can be taken. After all, ambitions are realized in interactions with and between the players, who should make optimal use of the circumstances as they occur at particular moments.

Implications for practice

Two important implications of contextualising strategic communication by focussing on conversations and stories for developing CSR policies are 1) accepting that we have to broaden the scope of accountability (Van Woerkum and Aarts, forthcoming), and 2) practicing for creating qualified conversations by "rediscover the art of talking together (Isaacs, 1999, Baker, 2010). We will shortly elaborate on both implications.

Broadening the scope of accountability
Concerning accountability we can distinguish between different forms of accountability. Firstly, the *performance* has to be accounted for, using indicators such as the outcomes, the results of communicative action, mostly (but not always) expressed in terms that are measurable quantitatively. Secondly, there is the *administrative / bureaucratic* accountability regarding the money that will be / is spent, the inputs used or the time

spent by professionals. Thirdly, we have the *ethical* accountability with respect to the moral dilemmas that are intrinsically linked to organizations at work (Gregory, 2001). Here CSR policies come in. Furthermore, we can – fourthly – point to *deliberative* accountability, concerning the justification of communicative actions vis-à-vis critical stakeholder groups, such as NGOs, the media, and critical groups of consumers or citizens. CSR policies are involved here as well. When we talk about *communicative* accountability, this form of being accountable does not include the whole functioning of the organization but is related to the way an organization is behaving communicatively. An organization must be honest in its messages, must be open or transparent on public or health issues (Van Woerkum and Aarts, 2008) and must be responsive to questions. Needless to say that again CSR takes part.

The art of dialogue and listening

Although it is increasingly recognized that conversations and stories are of utmost importance for a better organizational performance (Baker, 2010), characterized by, amongst others, an authentic and widely appreciated CSR policy it has to be admitted that communication professionals are not used to value conversations and stories for strategic communication and thus do not pay much attention to it. Most communication professionals are not educated in conversations and dialogue, but in carefully constructing and sending messages.Baker refers in her book 'Catalytic Conversations (2010) to Alan Webber (1993), formerly managing editor of the *Harvard Business Review* who says:

> *"The most important work in the new economy is creating conversations... But all depends on the quality of the conversations.…" (28).*

For communication professionals it is extremely important to invest in better conversations and dialogue. A good dialogue starts with recognizing and accepting differences and finding ways to deal with these in an appropriate way (Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997). Most people, however are not very well skilled in dialogue, because they mainly communicate with people with whom they agree, as we have explained in

this paper. The inclination to autopoiesis and self-referentiality of people and organizations makes that we find it hard to deal with differences, it also makes us poor listeners. Being open to others implies that we not only have to recognize and to respect diversity, differences and disagreement, we also have to accept uncertainty and unpredictability: when involving 'others' we do not know beforehand what will happen. Nevertheless, when better listening to our environment we enlarge the space to connect (Senge, 1994; Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997; Scharmer, 2007; Baker, 2010). Scharmer (2007: 11-13) has distinguished four basic ways of listening that may help recognizing effective ways to connect.

The first type of listening is what Scharmer calls *downloading:* listening by reconfirming habitual judgment, aimed at recognizing and confirming what we already know. Downloading makes it easy to connect to people of the same kind. The inclination to autopoiesis makes people excellent downloaders!

The second type of listening is *object-focused* or *factual* listening: listening by focusing on what differs from what we already know. Ideally spoken, both scientists and journalists should be good in object-focused listening.

The third way of listening is *empathic listening,* making it possible to get engaged in real dialogue. Empathic listening suggests directly connecting with another person, allowing the other to enter your world. This results in a shift of perception which may be similar to what Pearce and Littlejohn call transformative conversation as the result of a good dialogue (Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997).

The fourth way of listening is what Scharmer calls *generative listening*, making it possible to connect to the highest future possibility that wants to emerge (Scharmer, 2007: 13). While generative listening we go through a subtle, but profound change (idem, 13). Generative listening combines the former three types of listening and results in connecting to others by means of adaptation. Hence, for effective strategic communication that connects the contexts of actors involved, be it employees or external stakeholders, generative listening is an extremely important skill, worthwhile to invest in by means of awareness raising, training and education. Once recognizing different forms of listening we could already start practicing these forms.

If we accept the idea that relevant policies, including organizations' CSR policies are constructed in conversations, then it seems wise for organizations to invest in the improvement of the conversation skills of communication professionals. Being able to generative listening and to contribute to constructive dialogues is not only important for face-to-face conversations, but also for effectively getting involved in the never-ending conversations that take place via current social media in which both conditions and possibilities for effective CSR policies are constructed, shared, monitored and evaluated.

Conclusion

Starting from the well-accepted idea that CSR policies should be the result of effectively connecting of organizations with the ever-changing environment which asks for two-sided contextual communication, we have explored why most communication professionals are still mainly active in constructing and sending messages and repeat these until they have the illusion that everybody has heard them. We learned that the inclination to self-reference makes people and organizations reducing contexts by selecting, adapting, transforming and incorporating these in their own system. Communication between social systems is therefore inherently problematic. We have analyzed what stories and conversations mean for bringing back the context in communication and thus for connecting different interpretive communities. Finally we described the consequences of contextualizing communication for practice. It is concluded that organizations that aim for constantly be 'CSR-proof' need to revalue conversations and dialogues which asks for training and practicing different forms of listening.

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