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CSR and Trust: An Analysis of CSR-Communication of Major German Companies

Nowadays, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a standard practice among major companies. Firms invest heavily in CSR activities to support worthy causes but also to communicate them to the public. In the past, many companies have dedicated huge resources to inform their stakeholders about their positive societal impact via media campaigns and cultivated press relationships. However, the question remains whether the resource-intensive relationship maintenance with the media actually pay-off. Past research shows, that CSR communication often breeds public cynicism, suspicion and mistrust among consumers (e.g., Porter & Kramer, 2004). In this study, we analyze how the issue of CSR is covered in German newspapers and magazines. Specifically, by providing a profound insight into the state of CSR media coverage we investigate how CSR is typically related to attributions of trust towards companies and, amongst other, whether CSR elicits more positive or negative news reporting compared to other issues.

Selected preliminary results indicate that CSR communication is a double-edged sword when it comes to building trust through the public discourse represented in news media. Specifically, CSR content (including company- and journalist-initiated reporting) is significantly less positive ($M=2.72$, $SD=1.14$; 1 – negative attribution of trust, 5 – positive) than any other corporate news (except corruption reporting: $M=1.32$, $SD=.55$; for comparison, news on products: $M=3.34$, $SD=1.15$). Interestingly, journalist-initiated CSR coverage is more negative ($M=2.65$; $SD=1.27$) than company-initiated news ($M=3.47$; $SD=1.11$).

The study is limited due to its focus on trust attributions in printed news just in Germany, regarding only major companies listed in the German stock index (DAX). Furthermore, trust attributions only allow conclusions concerning journalists' perceptions of the trustworthiness of companies. Thus, future research should match the presented data with survey data (e.g. with the Edelman Trust Barometer).