From Aspirational Talk to Actionable Walk: Framing a Vision of Socialized Business

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Companies increasingly provide social services in public fields such as healthcare and education, especially in developing countries and emerging markets where weak governments do not enforce the rights of their people (Matten & Crane, 2005). The companies’ involvement challenges the traditional division of labor between governments, companies, and civil society, thereby also rendering inapplicable institutionalized norms as to what their role ought to be (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Rather, in the absence of unambiguous institutional frameworks, companies face multiplicity, conflict and contradictions (Mair, Martí, & Ventresca, 2011; Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). Popular management concepts, such as the notion of Shared Value Creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) or the Bottom of the Pyramid idea (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002), suggest that companies may overcome the friction between profit and philanthropy and instead integrate social objectives into their business. Many companies have picked up these concepts and use them in their communication to stakeholders. More than that, recent contributions in the CSR literature have argued that such communication may indeed be aspirational (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013), and may prompt corrective action when decoupled from practices (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012). These studies highlight the potential of communication to inspire new business models that accentuate societal impact, thereby infusing business with social considerations.

Indeed, institutional theory has highlighted the transformative potential of communication and highlights communication as paramount to institutional processes of reproduction and change (Joep P Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015). For example, actors may use language to construct and convey cognitive schemas, thereby formulating new ideas and a vision for institutional change (Werner & Cornelissen, 2014). Communicative institutionalism points at constitutive effects: that is, it highlights that communication affords the construction of a new reality. Yet instead of starting from the assumption that communication has powerful effects, a more fruitful approach may be to relativize the muscularity of discourse by problematizing its constitutive effects (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). The link between talk and
action has been explored by drawing on the notion of framing (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Framing pertains to the interactive construction of interpretation schemes in which actors negotiate a common understanding and motivation for action (Benford & Snow, 2000; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). This literature suggests that whether talk motivates walk depends on the audience’s responsiveness to a proposed framing: the framing must resonate—“strike a responsive chord” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 477). In this view, the constitutive effects of communication must be considered a discursive achievement that requires discursive work (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012).

In this paper, I show that CSR communication may inspire new business models when actors put effort into framing an actionable vision. A CSR department may emerge as an agent for change and promote socially responsible business practices in and beyond the organization by constructing a strong framing that convinces others as well as themselves. The paper presents how a team within the CSR department of a Danish pharmaceutical company constructs a provisional framing of its access to care initiative in Indonesia by working with the notion of Shared Value Creation. Using an inductive case study design inspired by the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I traced the construction of the provisional framing presented in the so-called Blueprint for Change publication through participant observation and interviews complemented by documents and secondary sources. The findings suggest that the promotion of the Shared Value idea to diverse sets of internal and external stakeholders requires the team to blend several frames. The blending gives rise to contradictions and incoherences in the report, which require substantial work to reconcile. They create a common denominator by highlighting the access to care frame which resonates widely and is almost undeniable since it is morally rooted in human rights. In response to audiences’ questions, the provisional framing is edited and strengthened. In this process, resulting from the attempt to convince others, the team incrementally stops asking question and becomes convinced.

The paper suggests important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the emerging literature labelled Communicative Institutionalism by advancing our understanding how communication may construct new social realities. It also contributes to the literature on framing by shedding light on how frames operate, specifically in the work that actors invest in constructing a new framing and how the construction recursively affects their own understanding. Finally, it contributes to our understanding of field dynamics by showing the recursiveness of discursive field processes in which meaning and roles are negotiated. Practically, it highlights the potential of CSR communication to transform the role of business in society, and highlights the process through which aspirational talk may turn into actionable walk.
REFERENCES


