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Chapter 7

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in Singapore: Toward More Effective Media Relations

Augustine Pang, Angela Ka Ying Mak, and Joanne M.H. Lee

Abstract Organizations face several impediments when it comes to communicating their corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement to the public via the media. This paper examines practitioners' and journalists' perception of CSR communication using the agenda-building model (Qiu Q, Cameron GT, *Communicating health disparities: building a supportive media agenda*. VDM Verlag, Saarbruecken, 2008) by examining news coverage of how practitioners and journalists understand CSR, what types of CSR stories get covered in the media, and how are CSR stories portrayed in the media. News coverage of Singapore's mainstream publications, *The Straits Times*, *The Business Times*, and *The New Paper*, were analyzed. The constructed week method was used and two constructed weeks (14 days) were randomly picked to enable a representative sample of a year's worth of news articles (Riffe D, Aust CF, Lacy SR, *J Q* 70(4):133–139, 1993). Media coverage of CSR engagement was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis will allow us to compare the perceptions of CSR held by PR practitioners and journalists and actual media coverage.

Findings suggested differences in perceptions of what makes news between practitioners and journalists. This is a reflection of the fundamental and larger issue of what each set of professionals regard as news: Practitioners view news as advancing their organizational interests, while journalists regard news through newsworthiness lens. How can that schism be bridged? A framework of media relations is proposed based on Pang's (Corp Commun Int J 15(2):192–204, 2010) Mediating the Media model.

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7.1 Introduction

For all the connotations of altruism associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR), one would imagine that organizations would not have problems sharing their efforts publicly via the media. While organizations are free to publicize their work in their own social media platforms, the top management still defines the effectiveness of communication by the positive media coverage generated (Pang and Yeo 2009). From a societal point of view, if the media can increase public understanding of the concept and drive organizations to be more involved, the increased participation can potentially move a society toward greater awareness of sustainable development and be more “future-oriented” (Signitzer and Prexl 2008, p. 7). This could lead to shifts in the public’s attitudes and behaviors such as more informed purchasing decisions and greater empowerment.

The issue, however, is far less straightforward. Organizations face several impediments when it comes to communicating their CSR engagements. First, many organizations shun media spotlight on their CSR activities for fear that the media would view the organization’s CSR engagement with cynicism or advert it to corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) (Dickson and Eckman 2008). Second, some organizations, especially smaller ones, do not see the need to publicly announce their contributions to society believing that good deeds should be carried out with humility (Lee et al. 2012). Third, CSR communication requires extra resources depending on the extent of communication the organization chooses. Fourth, the media may not be entirely convinced about the newsworthiness of CSR stories (Lee et al. 2013).

This chapter examines practitioners’ and journalists’ perception of CSR communication in Singapore using the agenda-building model (Qiu and Cameron 2008) as its theoretical lens. The model examines how information residing within an organization gets translated to actual media content via journalists as intermediaries. It allows us to understand the process by which practitioners attempt to influence the press agenda. As CSR is an organizational activity, information resides within the organization. While some aspects of CSR such as community service and philanthropy may be public events and the media may be able to gather information independent of practitioners, a huge part of CSR revolves around its commitment to internal stakeholders as well as their business processes which are usually not publicly known. It is therefore dependent on communication practitioners from the organizations to actively inform the media, through information subsidy, of organizational decisions, process, events, and engagements. Information subsidy is the attempt to affect others’ actions by “controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions” (Gandy 1982, p. 61).

In agenda building, information subsidy is one of the primary ways in which news sources can relay their message to news content producers. Agenda building is argued to be a suitable framework as it allows us to trace the flow of communication from the major source (practitioners) of CSR to newsmakers. The objective is to find out whether organizations can communicate about CSR without having it viewed negatively as a promotional strategy, their current success at influencing news content, as well as how the agenda building can be done more effectively.

This chapter is divided into the following sections. The next section examines media as a conduit in CSR communication in Singapore. Here, the section describes the current state of CSR coverage in the media and then examines the root of the problem which is between practitioners and journalists. This is followed by the agenda-building model where journalists and practitioners can collaborate in greater detail. In section three, we present why Singapore is an intriguing case to study and how we qualitatively content analyze Singapore's two national broadsheets and a tabloid-sized paper, *The Straits Times (ST)*, *The Business Times (BT)*, and *The New Paper (TNP)*, to examine media coverage of CSR engagement in Singapore. The analyses allow us to compare the perceptions held by practitioners and journalists and actual media coverage. In section four, we examine what can be done to cultivate effective media relations by positing a media relations model. The results of the initial test of the model are shared. Section five concludes what practitioners can take away from this study and how can relations and understanding between journalists and practitioners be further improved.

This study is significant on several fronts. First, it aims to build on agenda-building literature, which in this case is encapsulated in Qiu and Cameron's (2008) model, to identify factors that affect the agenda-building process. Second, this study will allow researchers and practitioners to identify discrepancies between agenda builders' perception of journalists' views toward CSR engagement and vice versa. The examination of these discrepancies may provide new directions for agenda builders to ensure that what they are advocating is congruent with journalists' needs. In turn, this will increase the productivity of CSR practitioners in generating greater public awareness of their organization's CSR engagement. Third, this study goes beyond agenda building to examine how to build effective media relations. Media relations remains an "important" and "tactical function" (Shaw and White 2004, p. 494) of corporate communications. In media relations, practitioners seek favorable publicity for the organization's products and services (Sallot et al. 1998; Seitel 2004; Sinaga and Wu 2007; Yoon 2005) often through information subsidy (Supa and Zoch 2009) to "enhance the reputation of an organization" (Bland et al. 2005, p. 55). With the proliferation of diverse media platforms, engaging both online and mainstream media remains a prevailing challenge. The question remains: How, then, do practitioners practice effective media relations? This study aims to shed light.

7.2 Media as Conduit

7.2.1 Definition of CSR

CSR has been defined in myriad ways. The most widely used definition is by the Commission of the European Communities (2001), "A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Dahlsrud 2006, p. 7). Matten and Moon (2004) attempted to offer an overarching definition, one where CSR overlaps with other concepts like business ethics, corporate philanthropy,

corporate citizenship, sustainability, and environmental responsibility. Carroll (1991) asserted that CSR comprises economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Thus, CSR encompasses a wide range of commitment to both internal and external stakeholders. CSR communication research has overlooked an important player in the process of communication – the corporate communication practitioners who provide information subsidies to the media on their organization's behalf and, in the process, shape the media's agenda and possibly public opinion (Turk 1985). The important role of PR practitioners in affecting what is ultimately said to the public can be seen in that information from press releases amount to approximately half of the news content (Wilcox and Cameron 2009). Thus, to complement CSR communication research that has been carried out from the perspectives of organizations, the environment, and the stakeholders, this study examines a rarely explored aspect – the role of PR practitioners and the media.

Pang et al. (2011) argued that political, social, economic, and cultural factors influence CSR communication. CSR communication is posited to be important in moving the society toward greater awareness for the environment and the community as well as creating the impetus for other organizations to take up CSR (Dawkins 2004). CSR reporting has also been argued to be a critical component of CSR as it necessitates reflection, which makes the organization more committed to its CSR program. It also informs the organization's stakeholders of its business decisions and processes, thus quantifying or qualifying the organization's actions (Fassin 2008). The trend is moving toward encouraging CSR communication for all organizations. Yet, it has also been cited as the "missing link." As a result, it has been found that many organizations do not get the "credit" they deserve (Dawkins 2004, p. 108).

7.2.2 CSR Coverage in the Media

Little research has been conducted on CSR coverage in the media, particularly in Asia. This section reviews four studies that had been conducted in the West.

Dickson and Eckman (2008) analyzed media content in response to five of the Fair Labor Association's (FLA) reporting, a nonprofit organization (NPO) concerning companies accredited by them, and the results were encouraging. Contrary to organizations' anxiety of receiving bad press, coverage was mostly positive for all five events. However, the positive coverage may stem from the accreditation by the FLA and results may differ for organizations who are directly communicating their CSR efforts to the media. Another notable point is that most of the coverage followed a certain format: information about FLA, information about the organization that is quoted from the FLA reports, and interviews with extremists who were cynical about CSR. This seems to suggest the media is keen to provide opposing points of views to make the story balanced as seen from how extremists rather than experts were interviewed.

In their analysis of 33 US newspapers and 18 international newspapers, Zhang and Swanson (2006) devised a typology of media use of the term CSR into the following categories: objective use, social achievement of corporations, necessary business function, social expectation for corporations, and spin. They found that

29 % of the stories used the term objectively, 18 % as an endorsement, 27 % as a social expectation, 5 % as a specialty, 6 % as a necessary business function, and 15 % as a spin. Considering that only 15 % of coverage is negative (spin), it shows that the media largely accepts the idea of CSR.

Tench et al. (2007) surveyed the UK media practitioners and found that 66 % of practitioners indicated they would report CSR from a positive angle although 32 % said they most frequently cover negative angles. What was interesting was that while 45 % of the journalists interviewed felt that organizations were engaging in CSR for purely profits, 56 % felt that the media as a whole would hold such a view. This shows that the tendency to blow up cynicism of CSR engagement exists even among journalists. The researchers also broke down the type of CSR angles and journalists were asked to indicate the type of stories they would cover positively, negatively, or not at all. CSR activities such as obeying law and order, adapting to changing stakeholder needs, and fulfilling obligations to the society were not likely to be covered, whereas environmental efforts, community work, and philanthropic projects were likely to be covered. This supports Zerk's (2008) assertion that the media is contributing to the formation of an incorrect conception of CSR as comprising of caring for the environment and the community to a large extent. Issues related to corporate governance, quality of products, and ethical work operations were likely to be covered negatively.

Besides having exaggerated fear of media backlash, organizations' fear of public backlash seem to be unfounded as the Market & Opinion Research International (MORI) survey also found that 60 % of the British public said they would trust CSR communication originating from the organization, thus making organization disseminated information almost as trustworthy as those originating from NPOs (66 %). MORI also surveyed several opinion leaders on the importance they accrued to organizations' CSR communication. Results showed that editors were most concerned, with 80 % of those surveyed indicating that they were looking for proof of organizations' social responsibility.

Besides publicizing its own efforts, the media is the perfect conduit. Pang et al. (2014b) argued that even with the proliferation of social media, engaging the mainstream media remains critical. This is because there is credibility in the news covered by mainstream media. George (2012) argued that the credibility comes from the "discipline of verifying information with multiple sources, institutional memory to sense when things are more complex than they seem, and higher order judgment honed by experience and specialized beat knowledge" (p. 179).

Therein, however, is the problem. How do practitioners build good relations with journalists when there is a historical root of distrust?

7.2.3 Root of the Problem Between Practitioners and Journalists

According to Pang (2010), influencing the media in the news production process through information-subsidy function has long been the *modus operandi* in media relations (Bland et al. 2005; Lerbinger 2006; Wilcox and Cameron 2009). Corporate

communication's influence on news content is dominant (Gandy 1982), which researchers estimate ranges from 25 to 50 % (Cameron et al. 1997). Journalists recognize that practitioners serve as one of the most important sources of news ("Media relations and Europe" 2008; Shin and Cameron 2003). Corporate communications' influence on news is so important that issues that suffer poor news coverage were managed by those who were not skilled or had no skills whatsoever (Cameron et al. 1997). Yet this process is fraught with challenges faced by practitioners: Why do journalists dislike them?

To unearth the roots of deep-seated antagonism that journalists have of practitioners (Tilley and Hollings 2008), scholars found that journalists often treat practitioners "with contempt" (DeLorme and Fedler 2003, p. 99). This is "puzzling" as journalists have "rarely, if ever, expressed a similar contempt for related fields" (p. 114). The long-held and innate dislike journalists have for corporate communications practitioners stems from historical roots, DeLorme and Fedler (2003) argued. Consistently, it appears to revolve around the idea that practitioners do not understand what journalists want.

The argument is that even though journalists recognize that practitioners serve an important information-subsidy function, those who do not know how to perform this function found little favor with journalists. In a survey among European journalists, more than two-thirds of practitioners were found to lack understanding of what journalists needed ("Media relations and Europe" 2008). The deficiencies appear to fall in the area of news sense. Sallot and Johnson (2006) found that 78 % of journalists surveyed said practitioners offered information that were "overtly and overly self-serving" (p. 84) on behalf of their organizations. Kopenhaver (1985) found that 78 % of journalists surveyed said that news releases were "publicity disguised as news" (p. 40). The top six reasons why editors rejected news releases were first, lack of news value; second, lack of local news angle; third, lack of information; fourth, lack of timeliness; fifth, poorly written; and sixth, grammatical errors. Supa and Zoch (2009) replicated a study by Kopenhaver et al. (1984) on how practitioners and editors in Florida viewed each other 23 years later. As far as how practitioners disseminate information to journalists, Supa and Zoch (2009) concluded practitioners still do not know how to present relevant information to journalists.

7.2.4 Agenda Building

Agenda building is one plausible way where journalists and practitioners can find common grounds. Qiu and Cameron (2008) examined the concept in the healthcare context to understand some possible determinants of agenda-building effectiveness and conceptualized a model (Fig. 7.1) to explicate the agenda-building theory.

Figure 7.1 shows the interaction among the three key elements in the agenda-building model: the PR practitioners and the PR materials they disseminate that contain source agenda, the journalists and their gatekeeping function, and the use of PR disseminated information in media content.

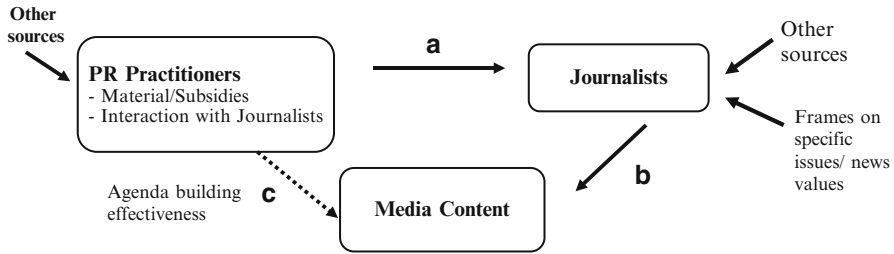


Fig. 7.1 Agenda-building model

In the process of building the media agenda, PR practitioners approach journalists with subsidized materials and, in the course of interaction with journalists, attempt to have their PR stories covered (arrow a). Ultimately, journalists still have the autonomy to decide how much and how the PR material is used (arrow b). Other than interaction with PR practitioners, journalists’ editorial decisions are influenced by the news values, comprehension of the issue, newsroom schedules, organization they belong to, and society, among others (Shoemaker 1991). Hence, the influence PR practitioners have on news content is mediated through journalists and the level of agenda building is determined by how much the media uses PR materials (arrow c). This model posits that the effectiveness of agenda building is affected by the degree to which PR practitioners and journalists share news values and understanding of a specific issue (Qiu and Cameron 2008). In their study, the authors also found that the reputation and type of organization can outweigh content knowledge and experience in affecting agenda-building effectiveness. For example, practitioners from major federal agencies were seen to have greater agenda-building effectiveness.

CSR reporting is a suitable context for the agenda-building process to be studied as the current level of CSR knowledge among journalists is suspected to be rather dismal, with most journalists equating it to philanthropy and going green. In addition, most aspects of CSR concern internal stakeholders and business processes which are most likely to remain confidential unless the organization decides otherwise. What this means for journalists is that organizations may be the main source of information, thus putting the latter in a better position to influence media content.

7.2.5 Singapore: A Social Media Hub Where Mainstream Media Remains Dominant

Singapore presents an intriguing case study: It is a social media hub but also a place where mainstream media remains dominant. Pang et al. (2014b) argued that Singapore’s highly legislated media industry is anchored by two local media players, Singapore Press Holdings, which owns most of the print media, and MediaCorp, which owns most of the broadcast media. The local media is complemented by

international media, including *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *The Economist* (Ministry of Communication and Information 2012).

With the advent of social media technologies, a significant shift in audiences' news consumption habits is to be expected. From 1.2 million Internet users in 2000 to more than 3.6 million in 2011, Singapore has one of the world's highest Internet penetrations at 77.2 %, comparable to the USA which had 78.6 % and Europe's 61.3 % (IWS 2012). Thus, besides traditional media, audiences in Singapore have easy access to online news portals, blogs, and non-mainstream media channels (Oon 2009). However, despite the emergence of new technologies and the use of social media, mainstream media remain dominant. US-based PR firm Edelman found that traditional media remained the most trusted source of information (Lee 2009). Even though all the mainstream media now run parallel digital editions on top of their respective print/broadcast media, only 11.3 % read these versions compared to 68.4 % who read the hard-copy newspaper, according to Nielsen's Media Index Report 2012 (Heng 2012).

What this means for organizations is that the mainstream media remains an important source of disseminating news. It is no wonder that *The Straits Times*, Singapore's newspaper of record, recently saw its circulation hit an all-time high of 410,000, including digital subscriptions (Sim 2014). Thus, cultivating effective media relations with mainstream media remains a paramount task. Bland et al's (2005) words ring true: "Used correctly, media is an invaluable tool for public relations practitioners" (p. 139).

Indeed, media relations in Singapore have remained a staple and critical public relations function among practitioners (Low and Kwa 2005; Tan 2001; Wee et al. 1996; Yeap 1995; Yeo and Sriramesh 2009). Consistently, it is a top source of revenue for most public relations agencies (Chay-Nemeth 2009; Tan 2001). Top management often used successful and positive media coverage as a key indicator to assess effectiveness (Pang and Yeo 2009). Pang et al. (2014b) argued that the challenge for practitioners in the immediate future is to enhance their media relations efforts with mainstream media while monitoring the gradual shift in news consumption patterns among audiences in an evolving media landscape.

For this study, to understand the state of CSR communication in Singapore, news articles were analyzed to examine practitioners' and journalists' views and how CSR is portrayed in the media. Three questions were asked:

RQ1: How did practitioners and journalists converge and differ on their understanding of CSR through the news coverage?

RQ2: Based on the agenda-building model, how do CSR stories get covered in the media?

RQ3: What other ways can practitioners get coverage for CSR stories?

7.3 Method of Analysis: Qualitative Content Analysis

Media coverage of CSR engagement in Singapore was analyzed using qualitative content analysis – "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying

themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278). The inductive nature of the qualitative content method allows researchers to infer themes that reflect the phenomenon from the data without hypotheses from existing theories or previous empirical research.

7.3.1 *Sample and Data Collection Procedure*

Texts were obtained from *The Straits Times (ST)*, *The Business Times (BT)*, and *The New Paper (TNP)*. The media outlets were chosen since *ST* is the highest circulating English newspaper in Singapore, recently hitting all-time high of 410,000, including digital subscriptions (Sim 2014). *BT* is an influential source of business information in Singapore (Singapore Press Holdings 2009), and *TNP* is a tabloid known for the distinct angles its articles take.

The constructed week method was used by randomly picking two constructed weeks (14 days) from the period June 1, 2009, to May 31, 2010. The constructed week method is more efficient than random sampling as it avoids oversampling on particular days. Sampling two constructed weeks was found to be a reliable estimate of 1 year’s worth of newspaper issues (Riffe et al. 1993).

To ensure an unbiased and systematic selection of CSR articles, 2 days’ worth of the three papers was read by two observers who individually identified what they thought were CSR articles. Subsequently, the observers discussed why they did or did not identify the various stories as CSR stories to be included in this study. It was concluded that (1) editorials and review sections, including articles contributed by foreign journalists or taken from foreign papers, would also be analyzed as its inclusion in the local paper probably means the local newsmakers consider the points valid; (2) the forum section, while useful in learning about the public’s view of CSR, is beyond the scope of this study; and (3) government decisions about CSR-related items such as labor issues are not treated as CSR articles unless it is mentioned in the article how the decision affects organizations. Based on the conclusions, the remaining editions of the papers were read by one observer.

A total of 201 newspaper articles were reviewed, with 98 from the *ST*, 80 from *BT*, and 23 from *TNP*. While both *ST* and *BT* have CSR-related news every day, an average of 7 and 5.7 articles, respectively, *TNP* has the least CSR-related news at an average of 1.6 articles, usually found in the “News Watch” column, a small column which summarizes some news stories of the day.

7.3.2 *Data Analysis*

The study followed the approach developed by Moran-Ellis et al. (2004) called “following a thread” where key themes and analytic questions were first identified within the data set. First, the data collected was read to get a holistic view and in the process noted for recurring elements. This process started after half the data was

collected and was carried out concurrently with the collection of new data so that by the end of data collection, the data had been read through several times.

Second, categories and codes were created. Categorization classifies elements in the data according to similar properties. In this study, some of the categories were adapted from Qiu and Cameron's (2008) framework in examining communication of healthcare disparities as a reference. As the topic of communicating CSR encompasses several differences from communication of health disparities, new categories were added to take into account the deviation from Qiu and Cameron's study. Codes were then subsumed in a category to give greater meaning to the elements. In the analysis process, data was first coded according to the subject matter, such as "experience" and "newsroom functions," before being added to the category – "factors affecting CSR coverage." Data within the categories were further analyzed and links between the entire data set were inferred to gain a holistic picture of the range of viewpoints reflected in the selected news articles.

7.4 Findings

Research question 1 examined how practitioners and journalists converged and differed on their understandings of CSR through the news coverage. The low usage of the term coupled with the arbitrariness did little to create awareness of CSR among Singaporeans and might in some instances such as the two below give the wrong impression that CSR was mainly about the organization's external contribution to society. Among the 203 articles analyzed, the term "corporate social responsibility" was mentioned only four times and even then, it was not clearly or accurately explained.

7.4.1 *Typifying CSR as Philanthropy*

The first mention of CSR was in an article about Singapore Press Holdings' contributions to various charity organizations (Zhang 2009). In this mention, CSR was directly alluded to as corporate giving to the community, "Besides giving to charity, SPH's corporate social responsibility program also involves supporting the arts, education, wildlife conservation and sports among other causes" (p. 4).

The second mention of CSR and perhaps the most definitive way the media typified CSR as philanthropy was when labeling it as such. In a series sponsored by CapitaLand, titled "Business Times Special Focus: Corporate Social Responsibility," half the article featured World Vision, a Christian relief agency. The other half focuses on the various donors to World Vision, with special emphasis given to CapitaLand Hope Foundation (CHF) (CapitaLand 2009).

It is thus not hard to imagine that readers will be misled by the use of the term CSR and assume it refers to philanthropy.

7.4.2 *Coverage Does Little to Increase Understanding and Awareness of CSR*

The third mention of CSR was in an article on the readiness of firms to respond to an older workforce (Chuang 2010). In this article, the term CSR was used as a function: “The report – launched yesterday by Community Business, a leading NPO specializing in corporate social responsibility – say most companies continue to show bias against older workers and prefer to hire young ones” (Chuang 2010, p. 12). The article further summarized key points from the report such as ways to make workplaces more inclusive but does not elaborate on the concept of CSR.

As a consequence, if journalists did not understand the concept, they were less likely to pay attention to it even if the concept was relevant to the news they were reporting. The following comparison of three articles on the same news shed light. This related to the fourth and final mention of CSR in the articles sampled. In *BT*, the term was quoted from a speaker at a conference on women being an untapped resource and the consequences for the economy in general (Teh 2009). The quote, “In the long term, more needs to be done to improve access of girls and women to education and training, and increased Corporate Social Responsibility to protect pay equity,” is the first and only time organizations’ role in protecting women’s interest and empowering women is mentioned in the article (Teh 2009, p. 9). The remainder of the article discussed the plight of women in Asia in general, and the sudden inclusion of the term “corporate social responsibility” may confuse readers who were unclear of the meaning.

What We Learned The analysis above shows the stark difference between practitioners’ and most journalists’ view of CSR. While practitioners have a holistic understanding of the concept and recognize it to be integral to their business, journalists mostly see CSR as extraneous to core business functions and comprising mainly of charity and environmental activities. The convergence in understanding occurs only among three journalists who have been designated the role of *CSR journalists* in their newsrooms. This has led to coverage in the news that perpetuates the lack of understanding. After all, if the writer does not understand the concept, it is unlikely their article will allow readers to understand either. The next part of this chapter shows how this lack of understanding interplays with other individual and organizational factors in the agenda-building process.

The second research examined how CSR received coverage in the media based on the agenda-building model.

7.4.3 *At the Journalist’s Level*

As “gatekeepers” (Shoemaker 1991), CSR stories were written according to the characteristics of the news organization and journalists’ experience and working style. An important point to note is that most journalists assigned to write CSR

articles had been in the profession less than 3 years. Considered junior journalists, their stories were often assigned by their editors. Hence, editors make for an important gatekeeper in deciding which CSR stories to publish, proposing new angles, giving advice in the writing process, and asking journalists to probe further.

The analysis of news data showed that the more experienced writers and the editors were the ones who feature CSR-related news in a detailed way, including helpful analysis, which allowed readers to gain a clearer picture of the importance of the issue. An article written by two journalists who had less than 3 years' experience was clearly an example of objective third-party reporting. The article, on a brand of nail polish being taken off the shelves due to the use of banned ingredients (Soh and Tan 2009, p. B12), offered two contrasting views from the health authorities and a professor on the safety level of the nail polish but did not attempt to reconcile or explain the differences, thus providing no help to the reader:

The HSA said the traces of benzene found were 'low' and were not expected to pose 'significant risks', especially when used over a short period of time... However, Professor Ong Choon Nam, a toxicologist from the National University of Singapore, said the amounts were high and could pose health risks (Soh and Tan 2009, p. B12)

Another article featuring the country's first green temple briefly talked about the solar panel technology it utilized, as well as the upgrading costs (Yen 2009). While the article mentioned the energy savings accrued to the temple, the larger significance of this story was lost with no effort made to go beyond this singular case study.

In contrast, in an article by a senior writer on the importance of MNCs being socially responsible, she gave good background information on industry trends such as Wal-Mart's effort to work with suppliers to reduce packaging (Chua 2009, p. A36). Subsequently, she discussed the trend of using the term CSR in Singapore "as a short hand for energy-efficient production and reducing waste" (p. A36) when in fact, it is much more. The examples in the story convey that supply chain, employee relations, and the use of resources are an integral part of CSR. She also talked about upcoming trends such as the implementation of ISO 26000 which further added to the importance of being socially responsible "before the tipping point is reached and going green becomes a mass movement and you are left behind in the race to meet new global standards on social responsibility" (p. A36).

This study also found that the experienced journalists also valued objectivity but tended to practice it in ways that did not affect the audience's understanding of the issue. One way was through the choice of sources. It was obvious that journalists from *ST* and *BT* had a preference for certain types of CSR stories.

Content analysis showed that most CSR articles came in the form of reports on studies and surveys that had been conducted. These articles were usually rich in statistics and offered a bird's-eye view of the society or industry without featuring any organization in particular. An example was a report on Aviva's survey on global consumer attitudes toward savings and investments ("S'poreans show" 2009, p. 8). The report cited major findings of the survey such as the percentage of people who had decreased trust in financial institutions, and the percentage of people who find life more risky than before. The article also gave a one-paragraph summary of the global financial crisis which was used to explain the loss of trust, "In the past year,

some structured products have collapsed amid allegations of mis-selling by financial institutions, causing investors to lose most and in some cases, all of their savings” (p. 8). Besides, the article focuses on the survey findings and does not link to the bigger picture of how a lack of corporate governance has led to these issues.

Second, government initiatives and policies were given coverage due to the usually immense impact it would have on society. Corporate governance was featured most extensively in *ST* and *BT*. The bulk of the stories in both papers came from the government regarding new policies and regulations. The strong government influence in the Singapore society together with the strict enforcement of laws affected business operations directly and indirectly through various channels such as union bodies and business chambers. It was therefore not surprising that government announcements which had a huge impact on businesses were given much attention in the major daily newspapers. However, the term CSR or related terms like sustainability were never used in tandem with corporate governance.

An example of government initiative was a government scheme to improve service standards (Wong 2009). The article in *ST* quoted a minister who said that training was the way to help job seekers. He urged employers to take full advantage of government incentives such as the Jobs Credit scheme and the Spur training programs (Wong 2009).

For journalists from *ST*, the third type of preferred CSR story was those from NPOs due to the “feel-good” factor as journalists feel they are doing good by helping to publicize something with no commercial motive. In an article where several business organizations partnered with an NPO to organize a campaign to foster closer bonds between fathers and their children, the participating business organizations were mentioned only once. The remainder of the article focused on two fathers and how they spent time with their children, prizes for winners of this campaign, and what the Health Promotion Board is doing in conjunction with this campaign.

7.4.4 At the Editors’ Level

Despite the increasing CSR awareness among newspaper editors, it had not led to more coverage of CSR news but came in the form of more articles in the reviews or editorials. The review section often contained editorials contributed by both local and overseas journalists as well as views from experts on CSR-related issues. These editorials either reflected the state of CSR, its importance, or, sometimes, criticized the status quo. The latter was most often found in *BT*. For example, in response to new SGX rules to do with corporate governance, the editor elaborated on some of the loopholes still present in the new system and opined that stricter SGX regulations are needed (Tay 2009).

Besides editorials, *ST* and *BT* seemed to be taking another approach in bringing about CSR consciousness. There were several weekly series where outstanding individuals, usually leaders of successful companies, were interviewed and shared the story behind their success. In these interviews, the interviewees often brought up CSR-related initiatives found in the European Commission CSR chart. Such series

were sometimes sponsored by companies or government-linked organizations, e.g., Spring Singapore, or big companies like OCBC (one of Asia's biggest banks). Another example of *BT*'s initiative to cover CSR could be seen in its weekly column "View from the top" which invited companies to respond to weekly themes. These themes were sometimes related to CSR. For example, one of the topics was whether companies were ready to reverse wage cuts previously put in place to cope with the recession ("View from the top" 2009). Each week's discussion featured 15–20 companies.

BT also partnered with other NPOs or businesses for weekly series. One example was Enterprise 50 which was a collaboration between a local business school and Enterprise 50, an NPO. Enterprise 50 had biweekly features of a local enterprise made good. In these features, the entrepreneurs shared their success stories and CSR inadvertently came into the picture. In the feature on Supersteel, the founder shared several organization values and policies which tied in strongly with the employee relations aspect of CSR (Soh 2009).

Commentaries were also a good avenue of CSI stories for these two papers. However, even commentaries on CSI were written with caution and only when there was a consensus that the situation was out of control. An example was Shell's petrol promotion which caused huge traffic jams, published in *BT* (Ee 2009):

What is interesting is that this is not the first time a Shell discount has caused traffic jams. On National Day, a smaller, 44-cent per litre pump discount for one hour had the same effect. However, waiting in a queue of at least 30 cars with the engine and aircon running is by no means being fuel efficient. Do we have to burn more fossil fuels just to experience better fuel economy? Then, there are the other cars and buses that have to expend more time and energy due to the snafu when they could have otherwise cruise smoothly by... But it could have been cleverer if Shell had done it with more efficiency and less wastage. (Ee 2009, p. 11)

While *TNP* regularly featured human interest stories, none of the articles sampled mentioned CSR or related terms. It was probably due to *TNP*'s focus on drama and conflict and their readership demographics that CSR became extraneous. In *TNP*, investigative reporting was more common. These stories may have spun out of a police case but the story encompassed findings that were not from the case and usually took the human interest and conflict angle. For example, after a woman's credit card was stolen and S\$17,000 was misused, a *TNP* journalist conducted an experiment where two Chinese women shopped at a store using an Indian man's credit card and the purchase was approved (Sim 2009). The journalist then conducted a survey among retailers, shoppers, and banks to find out what they thought should be done and found that retailers were not willing to take responsibility by making their employees check shoppers' identity when making credit card purchases. While this reflected retailers' lack of CSR, the article did not make that conclusion.

7.4.5 Focus on Beneficiaries

ST had the most stories related to giving back to the community, since it is the national broadsheet and had the most number of pages, which gave it space to cover soft news. Within these sponsorship stories, the focus was usually the recipient or

the sponsored event. The sponsor was usually mentioned in one to three sentences and not quoted unless it was a long-term commitment or a large-scale contribution to society. One of the most significant contributions featured in the sampled articles was Hewlett Packard's (HP) education grant initiative which invested about US\$17 million in 2009 to educational institutions worldwide. In the *ST* article, details of the scheme were given and the beneficiaries were interviewed, whereas HP was not quoted.

ST also had a section titled "Deeds list," where less than a quarter of the page was dedicated to featuring the various companies that had done something for a cause (Deeds list 2010). Organizations or individuals were invited to email *ST* with their projects or photos so as to be featured, and a two- to four-paragraph summary of each organization's contribution was written. In this particular edition, Standard Chartered was featured for raising US\$400,000 for the blind with more than 100 brokers worldwide donating a day's commission and the bank matching the donation dollar for dollar. OCBC was also featured when 20 staff painted a home for children and raised over \$87,000 for the home.

What We Learned CSR stories were usually not immediate and often considered soft news. Another exception was articles on listed companies' CSR initiatives. *BT* sometimes featured the innovations of listed companies. For example, in an article on Panasonic's new product (Bloomberg 2009), the focus was clearly the financial aspect for investors. The article talked about the amount Panasonic had spent on developing these products and its ongoing investment to produce batteries for car.

Thus, to answer RQ 2, an interplay of individual, organizational factors, and the nature of the subject matter affected how CSR stories were ultimately covered in the media. CSR, a topic that intrinsically had positive connotations for a company, worked to its own disadvantage when it came to communication by journalists as the latter had to battle their journalistic conviction of objectivity. The organizational factors made it more difficult for journalists to cover CSR news.

Research question 3 examined what other ways could practitioners get CSR coverage for their organizations.

7.4.6 *Be the Leader in the Field*

Content analysis of newspaper articles showed that awards did not necessarily guarantee organizations' news coverage. While CSR-related award stories were sometimes featured, usually on slow news days, it did not seem to be a priority. Moreover, in these articles, the focus tended to focus on human interest angle if there was one. In the case where the recipient was a business, coverage on the winner was usually scant.

An example is *TNP*'s coverage of the Chevron Case Challenge, organized by Energy Carta, an NPO, where teams competed to develop the best energy plan for a small city. The article focused on the winners and their group dynamics, the com-

petitiveness of the entries, and what the winning group intended to do with their winnings (“Powering a” 2009). The plan itself was given a one-paragraph summary, “They (won) by identifying environmentally friendly ways of generating power, such as using solar energy, and then came up with a mathematical model on how to progressively increase their usage over the years” (“Powering a,” 2009, p. 10). In addition, there was a photo caption of the winners together with a Chevron manager. The story was neither featured in *ST* nor *BT*.

When organizations won an award, the organization was not the focus of the article either. In a study of investor relations practices in Singapore and the top performing companies (Wilmot 2009), the article focused on the statistics of investor sentiments as well as the most important qualities of organizations’ investor relations practices. The winners were usually featured in one to two paragraphs as shown below:

According to the study, the winners – SingTel and Olam – share a number of best IR practices. SingTel, for instance, organizes annual board lunch meetings with institutional investors, while Olam encourages investors to visit its operations outside Singapore to boost confidence in the management team.

Mr Chia added: The No. 1 quality that fund managers appreciate is credibility of senior management. It’s about communicating good and bad news over a long time to build credibility and relationships with the fund manager. (Wilmot 2009, p. B16)

What We Learned Practitioners could understand what makes news and what journalists look out for in stories so that they can tailor the angles accordingly. From these examples, it shows that awards lead to potential news stories but organization names are usually not the center of the focus as a result of their CSR practices. CSR practitioners will also need to convince their senior management that they should not expect a full-page story for any success of their CSR journeys.

7.5 Toward Effective Media Relations

7.5.1 *From Agenda Building to Relating to the Media*

Scholars who studied the influencers of news content have realized the importance of communication practitioners (Curtin 1999; Zoch and Molleda 2006) in being proactive in setting organizational agenda in the media. Through their information-subsidy functions to the media, they shape public opinion (Turk 1985). Qiu and Cameron’s (2008) framework has identified how practitioners can set the agenda for the media by sharing similar news values with journalists. Kioussis (2005) postulated that similar to the two levels of agenda setting, practitioners build the agenda on two levels: at the first level, they provide information subsidies to the media and in doing so have a say in determining the issues covered by the media; at the second level, practitioners influence the tone of the issue coverage.

Pang (2010) argued that practitioners can do that by understanding the journalist mind-set, for instance, their background and individual characteristics like the journalist’s gender, ethnicity, education, experience, and political affiliation can help

practitioners enhance their information-subsidy function by knowing how journalists write and what interest them. This will in turn help them frame information suitable for journalists' use.

More critically, differences in perceptions on what constitutes news aside, another long-standing criticism journalists have of practitioners is that practitioners do not understand media relations: While there are practitioners who appreciate the importance of developing relationships with journalists, journalists felt that there are some who do continue to reinforce the climate of distrust.

Inspired by and adapted from Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of influence, Pang (2010) developed the Mediating the Media model to provide a holistic view of how media relations can be conducted by organizational leaders with the primary objective of winning the journalists over by the knowledge of their work and their profession. The model posits both internal and external influences on media relations (see Fig. 7.2).

Besides the journalist mind-set, practitioners need to understand the influences of four other factors.

Journalist Routines Understanding the journalists' routines, such as deadline pressures, would help practitioners disseminate information at times where the organization can get maximum coverage. This is useful especially when the organization needs to tell its story and not let it be crowded out by other news.

Newsroom or Organizational Routines Understanding organizational routines would enable practitioners to understand who holds manifest power in deciding news. Reporters, editors, and owners should arguably be the foci of practitioners' attention and relations because they hold manifest power. Even though copy editors and subeditors do not have direct influence on media relations, they can play instrumental or latent roles in influencing those who hold manifest power.

Extra-Media Forces Understanding organization-press relations would help practitioners appreciate the nature of media practices in the context they operate in and the legal parameters so that they can position the organization in the media appropriately.

Media Ideology Understanding ideological forces would help organizational leaders appreciate the role the media plays in the contexts they operate in. Knowing how each media fits into the societal puzzle would inform practitioners on where and how they can put out messages that target their specific audiences. Messages can be custom-tailored to suit each media.

Like Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model, this model similarly consists five layers of concentric circles, described as a "hierarchy of influence," each growing in importance and pervasiveness as it expands. At the heart or the bulls' eye of the concentric circle is journalist mind-set, followed by journalist routines, and then newsroom or organizational routines. These are the internal influences on media relations. Extra-media influences form the next circle, and followed by media ideology. At the outermost circle, ideology is argued to have the most pervading influence on media relations (see Fig. 7.2).

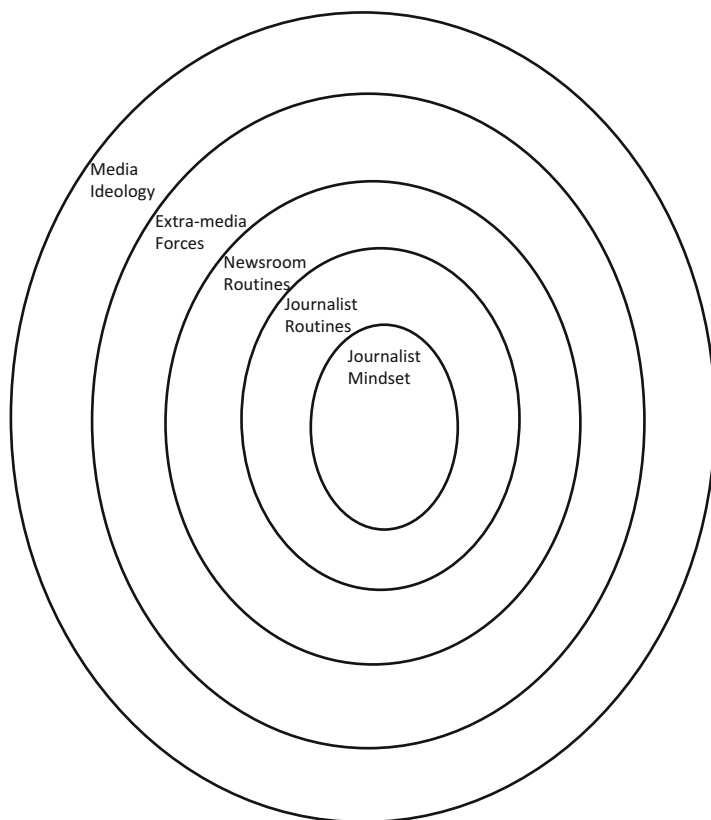


Fig. 7.2 Hierarchy of influence of media relations in mediating the media model

If external forces appear to exert indirect influence on media relations, then internal forces exert more direct influences on media relations. Internal influences localize media relations to the individual organization and the journalist working for that organization. External influences are extensions of the localized relations, or what Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) called societal impacts.

While it is argued that there is a linear flow of influences, in that media ideology influences filter down to extra-media influences, to organizational, to routines, and then to the journalist, the model also accords dynamic interactions among the influences. It is thus conceivable that though ideology dictates media system, the individual ideology of the journalist can ultimately decide the kinds of relations he desires with practitioners.

An initial test of the model in Singapore has found it rigorous (Pang et al. 2014b). Findings, however, showed that internal influences played a more dominant role than external influences. Among the influences, journalist mind-set ranked ahead of newsroom routines and journalist routines, followed by the two external influences, extra-media forces and media ideology.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined media coverage through the lens of corporate social responsibility, how an altruistic topic such as CSR can be construed differently by practitioners and journalists. It boils down to media relations, and how those relations and understanding between practitioners and journalists can be improved. Pang's (2010) Mediating the Media model is posited as one model where practitioners can use to win over journalists by understanding how they work. This model is instructive for new practitioners to view media relations as a holistic process involving a set of interacting influences rather than merely an information-subsidy function. For seasoned practitioners, the model serves to encourage them to reevaluate their current strategies and to engage in strategic thinking on how to transform their current practices. Practitioners have found this model relevant as it offered a systemic framework to approach media relations effectively (Pang et al. 2014b). It has also been applied to build relations with social media influencers (Pang et al. 2014a) whom Freberg et al. (2011) defined as "a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90).

At the heart of media relations is establishing relationships (Howard 2004). The longer journalists know the practitioners, the more they "feel more kindly" (Len-Rios et al. 2009, p. 57) toward them and the "more favorably they view the progression of their relationships" (Sallot and Johnson 2006, p. 157). For instance, one reason why practitioners and journalists in South Korea enjoy strong relationships is due to *cheong*. Berkowitz and Lee (2004) defined *cheong* as a "kind of spiritual tie that is unconsciously established through direct or indirect contact and common experience" (p. 431). Though it arises from a historical context, this is reinforced by "continuous contact and common experience" (p. 433).

Some things in life take time to cultivate. Media relations is one. Even with the prevalence of social media, the mainstream media, in their traditional or digital forms, will not go away any time soon. When media relations across all media platforms are sufficiently nurtured, it will last the organization a lifetime.

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