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CSR-communication in the business press:
Advantages of strategic ambiguity

by

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**CSR-communication in the business press:
Advantages of strategic ambiguity¹**

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CSR-communication in the business press:

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Abstract

In this paper we analyze the construction of corporate social responsibility in the business press as an act of strategic ambiguity. While corporate social responsibility (CSR) generally evokes positive associations in public opinion, this paper demonstrates that these associations are based on a broadly encompassing and ambiguous definition of CSR. Our empirical data shows how the business press in its discourse on CSR provides no clarity on the definition of CSR in terms of a coherent motive, a dominant stakeholder or a consistent issue, but rather maintains ambiguity and imprecision about the meaning and content of CSR. While ambiguity and imprecision may be seen as an act of uncertainty in a passing stage when a new phenomenon emerges and develops, our longitudinal data demonstrates how ambiguity is preserved during a ten year period in four different daily newspapers. Ambiguity is systematically maintained in the business press. We refer to this process as strategic ambiguity. The paper discusses the potential value and limitations of framing CSR in a state of strategic ambiguity in the context of the concurrent rethinking of the role of business in modern welfare societies.

1. Introduction

Previous research has pointed to the imprecise and almost all-encompassing conceptualisation of CSR and stakeholder theory and argues that it adds to innovative theorizing as well as to the lack of precision of the field (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Stoney and Winstanley, 2001). While scholars disagree on to what extent the ambiguity in theorizing about CSR is productive or counter-productive, it provides stakeholders the freedom to define almost any issue, situation and decision as a plausible strategy as long as it is argued in terms of stakeholder engagement and CSR. As CSR is generally associated with desirable and positive virtues (Morsing *et al.*, 2005; Maignan and Ralston, 2002), a variety of stakeholders from different ideological or theoretical dispositions like to be associated with CSR (Habisch *et al.*, 2005; Marsden, forthcoming).

We contend that the positive connotation to CSR adds to its attraction, expansion and multiple use. In this paper our ambition is to empirically demonstrate the proliferation of CSR into an ambiguous concept in terms of its representation in the business press, and to analyze the potential value and limitations of this ambiguity. While some scholars – and various other stakeholders – have called for a more rigorous CSR definition, this has nevertheless not happened so far. Based on a longitudinal empirical study and systematic content analysis of ten years of articles on CSR in four Danish newspapers, we explore the potential value as well as the limitations of insisting on ambiguity in the field of CSR. Based on Eisenberg's theory of strategic ambiguity (1984) we discuss the characteristics and development of CSR in the business press.

We base our discussion on data from the welfare state of Denmark, and we acknowledge that the somewhat neutral yet fragmented representation of CSR in the business press may be a reflection of a specific Danish sensitivity towards CSR. In the Nordic welfare states there is no tradition for conspicuous corporate CSR initiatives (Morsing *et al.* forthcoming) as in the Anglo-Saxon area, where CSR is an expected aspect of corporate action in terms of philanthropy (Maignan and Ralston, 2002; Matten and Moon, 2004). On the one hand, CSR represents a challenge to the various constituencies in a traditionally state-defined context, and on the other hand, the welfare state is challenged and the role of business is being revised. As companies engage in social activities such as health and education that traditionally have been defined as a state obligation, it raises critical questions of democracy and power. While we do not elaborate on these challenges and implications, we contextualise our findings in the concurrent rethinking of the role of business in the Danish welfare society.

Hence, in this paper we analyze the construction of corporate social responsibility in the business press as an act of strategic ambiguity. Whereas corporate social responsibility (CSR) generally evokes positive associations in public opinion, this paper demonstrates that these associations are based on a broadly encompassing and ambiguous definition of CSR. Our empirical data shows how the business press in its discourse on CSR provides no clarity on the definition of CSR in terms of a coherent motive, a dominant stakeholder or a consistent issue, but rather maintains ambiguity about the meaning and content of CSR. While ambiguity may be seen as an act of uncertainty in a passing stage when a new phenomenon emerges and develops, our longitudinal data demonstrates how ambiguity is preserved during a ten year period in four different daily newspapers. Ambiguity is systematically maintained in the business press. We refer to this process as strategic ambiguity. The paper discusses the potential value and limitations of framing CSR in a state of

strategic ambiguity in the context of the concurrent rethinking of the role of business in modern welfare societies.

2. CSR and the business press

Buhr and Grafström (2004) claim, that the role of business news in the spread of CSR has gained comparatively less attention than the role of other stakeholders. Indeed, many studies have explored NGO pressure, consumer activism or public authorities and consultants' contribution to the diffusion and adaptation of new management concepts (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Despite of a few exceptions, such as the Buhr and Grafströms study (2004) and Kjær (2005) – the role of the media needs further illumination. Such analysis offers insights on how business journalists serve as mediators and co-producers in popularized sense making processes about CSR. Moreover, it offers insights on how the voices of various stakeholders are presented and reflected in the public discourse on CSR. Hence, analyzing how CSR is covered by the business press improves and refines our understanding of how CSR is being integrated into corporate and social life.

In this integration process, business news should not just be seen as a channel or a transmitter for the CSR-concept. Instead, our understanding of business news draws on the Scandinavian tradition of neo-institutionalism, as it has been developed in organizational studies (e.g. Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Brunsson, 2002; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002); and on an interactionist perspective in media sociology (Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Kjær and Langer, 2005; Kristensen, 2005). Here business news is seen as the outcome of ongoing editing processes and negotiations between business journalists and their sources that take place in local contexts and are socially controlled by cultural norms and expectations.

Buhr and Grafström's (2004) analysis of CSR in the "Financial Times" reveals, that CSR is not clearly defined and rather a wide and elusive idea that seems to center around environmental and social sustainability, a long-term approach to corporate strategy and the importance of stakeholders. As it is the case for similar concepts (such as communications, cf. Langer, 2005), such ambiguity and openness to a variety of ascribed meanings can facilitates the spreading, circulation and diffusion of CSR, as long as the concept promises a solution of corporate and business problems (Buhr and Grafström, 2004). In this context, Eisenberg's (1984) theory of strategic ambiguity becomes relevant.

3. Strategic ambiguity

Whereas clarity is generally perceived as a premise for effective organisational communication (van Riel, 1995; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Cornelissen, 2004), the theory of strategic ambiguity suggests that when managers and employees meet multiple and conflicting demands from internal and external stakeholders they may “respond with communicative strategies, which do not always minimize ambiguity, but are nonetheless effective” (Eisenberg, 1984:227). In fact, research on strategic ambiguity argues that “some degree of ambiguity in communications will enhance its (i.e. the organisation’s) ability to reach its goals” (Leitch and Davenport, 2002:130). While strategic ambiguity has predominantly been studied in internal organisational communication among managers and employees (Markham, 1996), as a driver in communicating organisational change (Leitch and Davenport, 2002), or from the perspective of the organisation’s staging of strategic ambiguity vis á vis its stakeholders (Eisenberg, 1984), our analysis extends the scope as it takes a point of departure in how an external stakeholder (i.e. the media) constructs strategic ambiguity in its representation of CSR vis á vis public opinion. This allows us to analyze strategic ambiguity as not only a phenomenon that serves the organisation, but also serves the interest of the media and potentially other stakeholders.

In his classic work on strategic ambiguity Eisenberg (1984) contends that strategic ambiguity may serve four roles: (1) it promotes unified diversity, (2) it preserves a privileged position, (3) it ensures deniability and (4) it facilitates organisational change. First, promotion of unified diversity addresses the ambition to enhance unity on organisational goals whilst encouraging individual initiative. Leitch and Davenport provide the example of “vaguely worded mission statements that allow multiple interpretations” (2002:130) as an example of strategic ambiguity that promotes unified diversity among internal and external stakeholders. Second, the role of preserving privileged positions concerns how strategic ambiguity may be used to paralyze and disorient an organisation in order for the powerful to avoid scrutiny and to ensure *their* solution will un-paralyze the situation and hereby support their position, as Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) suggest. Preserving privileged positions may nevertheless also serve in a slightly more positive mode the protection of sensitive information. Third, strategic ambiguity creates unclarity that may also be used to avoid premature closure on situations that may limit future options (Eisenberg, 1984:279). At the launch of a new idea it is often desirable to allow ambiguity as pros and cons are discussed and negotiated. Eisenberg highlights that this is a role that is desirable in the early stages of a project with the goal to develop more clarity on a given proposal accepted by relevant stakeholders. The fourth and last role is that of

facilitation of change. Here Eisenberg in particular points at the use of metaphors that create shared points of reference while allowing for unification of diverse stakeholders. Metaphors are by nature ambiguous and open to interpretation (Cornelissen, 2002) and therefore particularly appropriate tools for strategic ambiguity. In our discussion of the findings we shall return to the different roles of strategic ambiguity.

4. Methodology

Probably the most well established approach to the analysis of media texts is quantitative content analysis. The birth of this method can be dated back to the 18th century in Sweden (Asp, 1986:19), but its break through came first with Berelsons seminal article “Quantitative content analysis in communication research” (1952/71). According to Berelson and his followers the method enables the analyst to describe content systematically and objectively. However, as the coding procedure and interpretation of data relies upon the researchers’ judgements, there is still some degree of subjectivity involved. Quantitative content analysis reflects the idea that it is possible to measure the content of texts by examining the statistic occurrence of defined units, such as arguments or phrases. Therefore the first step in quantitative content analysis is to break down a text into countable units, and then to produce statistical computations in relation to categories, which are defined by the analyst. The results will then be evaluated and interpreted by the analyst.

Content analysis has been applied in a variety of disciplines and research applications, such as media and communication studies (cf. Krippendorf, 1980), organization studies (e.g. Kjær and Langer, 2005), and consumer research (e.g. Kassarian, 1977). More recently, content analysis has also proved to be valuable in CSR-research. Peterson and Hermans (2003) applied content analysis in an analysis of communication of social responsibility by US banks, Buhr and Grafström (2004) applied the method in a study on how CSR has been covered in the “Financial Times”.

The articles used in our analysis are from the four major Danish newspapers which collectively form the dominant part of the Danish business press (Politiken, Berlingske Tidende, Jyllands Posten and Børsen). They are all known for their business coverage and are regarded as the four leading business newspapers in Denmark. Børsen is a strictly business focused newspaper appearing 6 times a week, whereas Berlingske Tidende, Jyllands-Posten and Politiken are daily broadsheets.

Table 1: Overview of the Danish business press

| | Business content | Circulation | Geography | Opinion |
|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Berlingske | Separate supplement | 130.000 | Capitol region | Conservative |
| Børsen | Strictly business | 60.000 | National | Liberal |
| JP | Separate supplement | 160.000 | National | Liberal |
| Politiken | Business section | 135.000 | Capitol region | Social-liberal |

The newspaper articles have all been collected from two Danish electronic newspaper databases (InfoMedia and Børsen Article Archive). We have searched the databases for articles containing ‘social responsibility’ in all its different shapes (different endings according to the context). We have used the search term ‘social* <near/1> respons*’ to include all possible variants of social (e.g. socially) and responsibility (e.g. responsible, responsibly), thereby minimizing the risk of missing out on important data. The <near/1> search operator guarantees hits in which the two search phrases only appear coupled.

All newspaper articles were read carefully and judged to belong to one of three categories: Search errors, eliminated articles or useful articles. Search errors are obvious errors due to the uncertainty of the search formula (e.g. responsible social democrats). Those articles reporting about other kinds of social responsibility (personal, state, church, etc.) than corporate social responsibility were eliminated. The reason for not narrowing the search down to ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR) is the limited amount of hits compared to the ‘social responsibility’ search – even after cleaning out the errors and eliminated articles. All articles (including the search errors and eliminated articles) were assigned a number for easier processing.

Before starting the context analysis we built an analytical framework with a variety of categories. First, we wanted to examine the reason to why companies do/should do CSR according to the newspapers. In doing so we have drawn upon Paine (2003) and used her five motivations for why companies engage in CSR activities. Though, it soon became clear, that the five reasons did not fit the Danish CSR discourse completely and had to be supplied by the reason of ‘social reform’ due to an ongoing debate in Denmark about the role of the welfare state. Second, we wanted to learn about the articles’ attitude to CSR: whether it signalled a positive, negative or neutral opinion towards CSR. Third, we wanted to know if CSR was the primary story of the article or the secondary. Fourth, we wanted to examine the article issue to see what it was about. The issue

categories were created by random tests from different years and the main elements were summed up in five overall issues (inclusive labour market, leadership, societal responsibility, ‘the good story’, communication). Finally, we wanted to examine the significant references present in the articles (companies, government, media, etc.).

5. Findings

This section will present our main findings and exemplify the findings with quotes from our content analysis of newspaper articles showing how CSR is used for multiple purposes.

Our investigation identified all in all 1786 articles on Corporate Social Responsibility in the analysed newspapers, where the broadsheet daily Politiken has the lowest amount of items (387) and the business daily Børsen the highest amount of articles (517). In terms of distribution over time, our data collection revealed that CSR in 1995 and 1996 was a topic in an only limited number of articles (75 and 81), but that CSR experienced much more attention from 1997 onwards.

Table 2: Number of articles about CSR distributed over *Børsen*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, and *Politiken*, 1995-2004

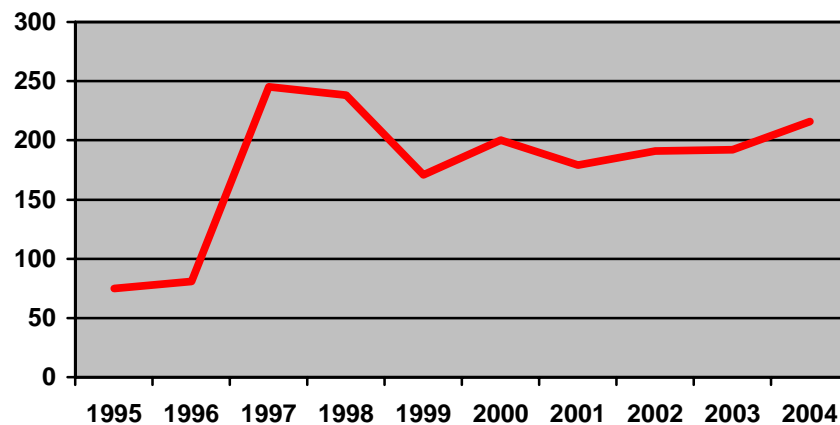
| CSR | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | SUM |
|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Berlingske | 33 | 25 | 75 | 65 | 50 | 43 | 42 | 39 | 59 | 45 | 476 |
| Børsen | 13 | 32 | 69 | 51 | 50 | 54 | 53 | 57 | 61 | 77 | 517 |
| JP* | 0 | 6 | 40 | 62 | 38 | 57 | 46 | 62 | 45 | 52 | 408 |
| Politiken | 29 | 18 | 61 | 60 | 33 | 46 | 38 | 33 | 27 | 42 | 387 |
| SUM | 75 | 81 | 245 | 238 | 171 | 200 | 179 | 191 | 192 | 216 | 1788 |

* JP includes articles only after 1 September 1996

Hence, our longitudinal study of the public discourse on CSR represented in the newspaper articles reveals that CSR has become a well-established discourse in the Danish business press. During the ten year of our study there is a conspicuous growth in the amount of absolute number of articles addressing CSR starting in 1996 with 75 articles to an increase in 1997 to 250 articles, as it is shown in table 2. Though this finding supports Buhr and Grafström (2004) study of the increasing amount of Financial Times articles on CSR, there is a difference in when the increase starts. Whereas the

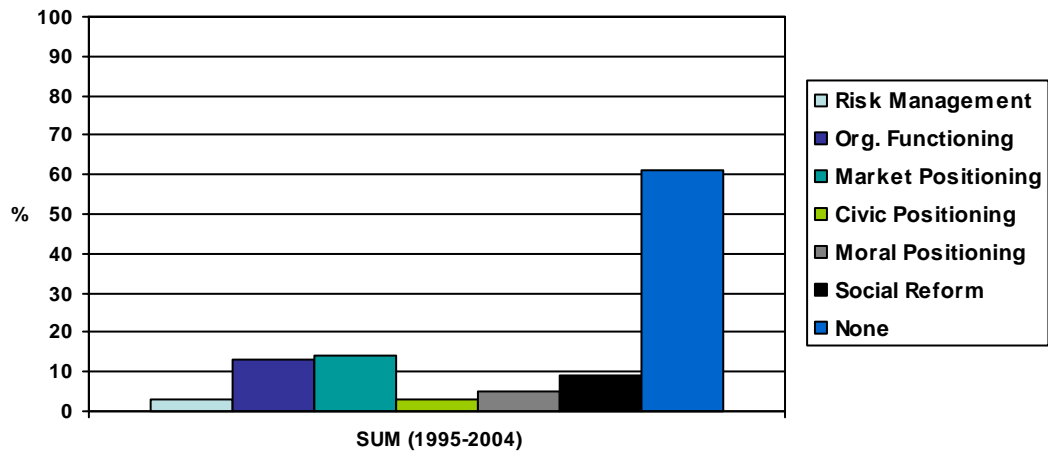
conspicuous increase of CSR mention in the Danish business press starts in 1997, the UK based business newspaper Financial Times experiences a dramatic increase some years later in 2002 from around 40 articles in 2001 to around 100 articles in 2002 (all in absolute numbers).

Table 3: Total absolute number of articles about CSR in the Danish business press (*Børsen, Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske Tidende, and Politiken*) 1995-2004



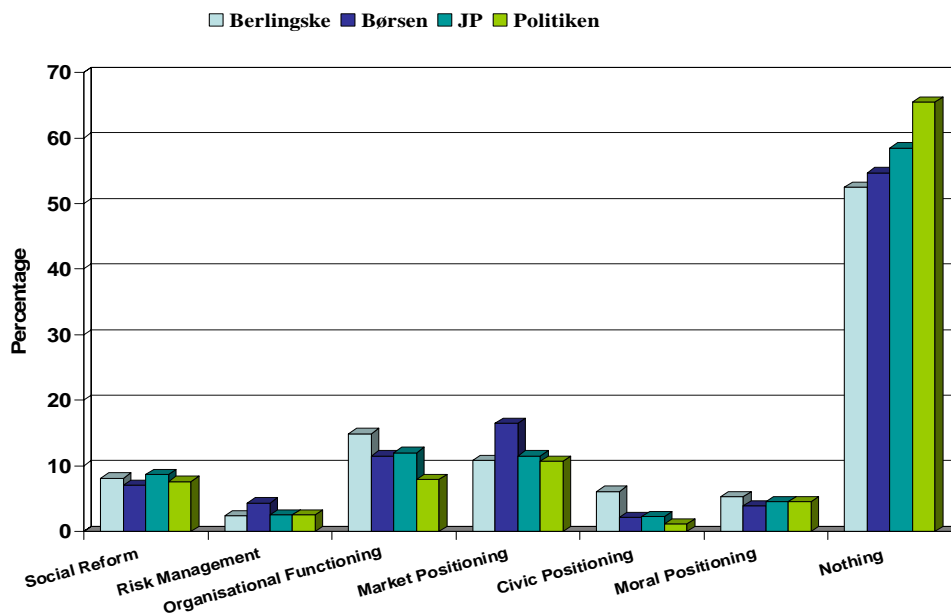
While table 3 illustrates a growth and relatively high and stable amount of CSR articles in the Danish business press from 1997, a content analysis reveals that there is little coherence in the business press' representation of why companies engage in CSR, i.e. risk management, organisational functioning, market positioning, civic positioning, moral positioning (Paine's categories, 2003) and social reform, which appeared as a motive in itself in our data (see table 4 and 5). By far the dominant part of the articles (i.e. 60%, see figure 3) represents no motive for CSR. That means that the dominant part of our data does not point to any motive for what is driving companies towards a CSR engagement.

Table 4. Total expression of motives for CSR in the business press (%)



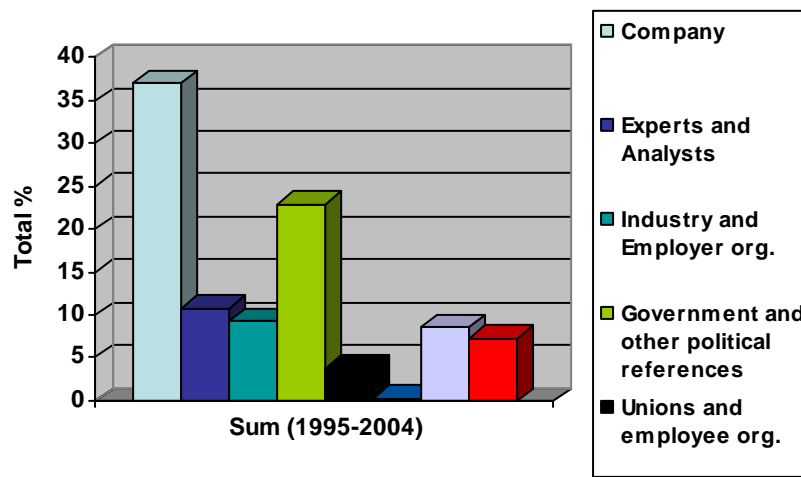
In the remaining part of the articles, we found that market positioning and organisational functioning were the two most frequently mentioned motives followed by social reform. However, the overall picture is that there is predominantly no motive mentioned for CSR and that there is a general distribution of attention to different motives in the remaining data. No newspaper has for example single-mindedly pursued market positioning or risk management as the dominant motivation for CSR. All newspapers have rather paid attention to a variety of motives driving CSR as shown in

Table 5. Total motives for CSR distributed over four newspapers



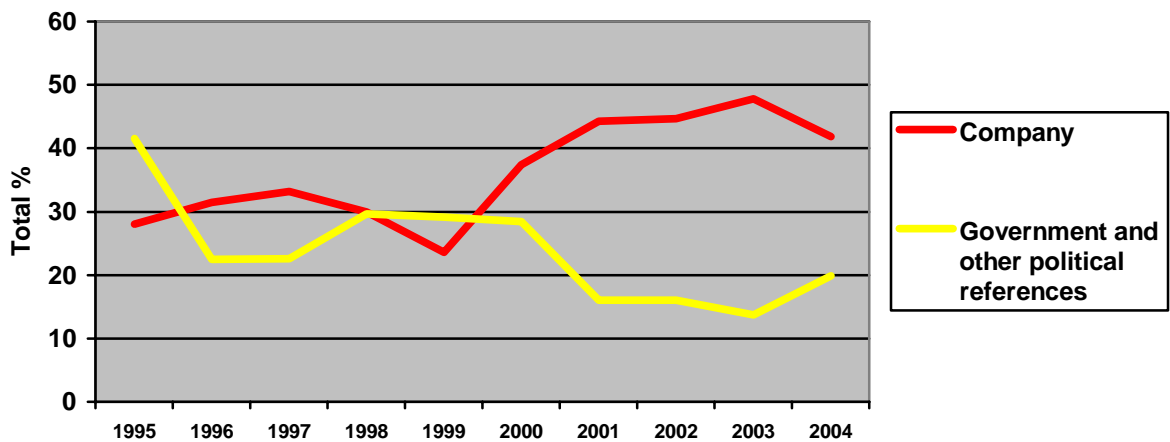
In our analysis of what stakeholders are represented in the business press' mention of CSR, two stakeholders stand out: companies and government (see table 6). Consumers and unions have a remarkably little voice in the business press on CSR issues, while experts/analysts, industry associations, single persons and “none” have a fairly equal distribution of “voice”.

Table 6: Distribution of references to institutions and actors in articles on CSR in *Børsen*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Berlingske Tidende*, and *Politiken*, 1995-2004



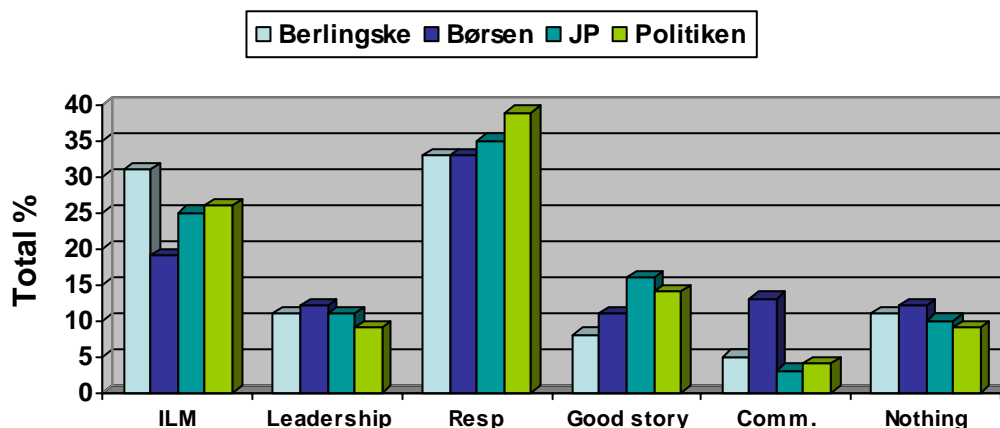
Although two main stakeholders stand out in the Danish CSR discourse: companies and government, we find a conspicuous change in the number of articles mentioning companies or stakeholders during the ten years of study (see table 7). While the two stakeholders have a common starting point with each just under 30% of the total amount of CSR articles in 1995, they develop rather differently. Where as articles on companies and CSR have increased, articles on government and CSR have decreased – with the exception of 1998 and 1999 where the two stakeholders are levelled. While this is most likely to be an implication of the culmination of the Danish inclusive labour market discourse initiated in 1994 by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, as well as the publication of a much debated report on corporate governance that likewise was initiated by public authorities, our point here is that there is no one dominant stakeholder on CSR represented in the media. Rather it is an ambiguous and changing representation of what stakeholders set the agenda on the public discourse on CSR.

Table 7: Development of stakeholder mention over time: companies and government



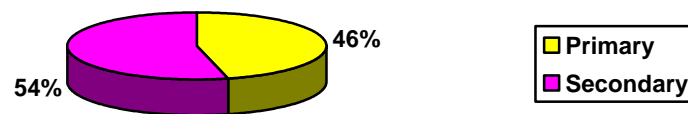
In our analysis we investigated how CSR is defined in the business press, and we content analysed for CSR issues, i.e. what issues are CSR associated with in the articles. Here we again found a somewhat dispersed picture. Five issues emerged: CSR as the inclusive labour market, CSR as leadership, CSR as a general social responsibility, CSR as a positive, good story and finally CSR in terms of communication. While CSR as a general social responsibility has the highest frequency of articles, it is also the issue with the least precise definition (see table 8), these results again also confirm the decisive influence of governmental authorities on the CSR-discourse in the Danish business press, as media coverage of the inclusive labour market are the second important issue.

Table 8: CSR issues distributed over four newspapers



Finally, our analysis of the media coverage shows how CSR is often used as rhetorical argument in debates and controversies or as an isolated topic in its own right, rather than being an integrated part of editorial coverage of individual firms and businesses. There is an almost equal division of articles mentioning CSR as the primary and as the secondary object of the article's content.

Table 9: Total expressions of intensity (%) (1995-2004)



To underpin our finding of a broad and generally encompassing and ambiguous representation of CSR in the business press, we finally display some examples from the newspaper articles that illustrate the variety of issues connected with CSR in the Danish business press:.

Issue: advertising

“Advertisements must be for example legal, decent, honest, true and produced with an appropriate sense of social responsibility”. (Berlingske Tidende, February 21, 2004, 1. section, p.8).

Issue: misuse, children, inclusive labour market

“Besides she (i.e. the minister of social affairs) has received funding with minister of labour policies Claus Hjort Frederiksen to make an extra contribution to have people with problems of misuse enter the labour market as an indirect help to the children. She hopes that companies will live up to their social responsibility and help to get this group into working”. (Berlingske Tidende, November 28, 2. section, Magasin, p. 6)

Issue: ludomania, sports

“The Superliga club AaB could in a press meeting on Friday tell that it wants to support and help its two ludomanians David Nielsen and Jimmy Nielsen. ... “It was sensible that they came to us and

talked about the problem. They have themselves paid their debt, and in turn we want to help them, because we are a socially responsible company. Let me emphasise, that they have not committed a crime. In principle, it is their own business what they spend their money on. It is not until it interferes with their work that we intervene”, says Lyng Jacobsen (AaB’s Director of Sport).
(Jyllandsposten, April 24, 2004, 1. section, p. 14).

Issue: *competitiveness, longterm*

“But is is a very old-fashioned and short-term way of developing your interests. Danish companies do not strengthen their competitiveness through marginal improvements of economic conditions. Denmark must in a globalised world compete on quality including environmental concerns, social responsibility, etc.” (Bent Hansen, regional mayor in Viborg, in Jyllandsposten, July 24, 2003, 1. section, p. 9)

Issue: *pension funds, residences, trade union members*

“The pension funds receive much. It is only their own members’ who will benefit from these new residences. It is a shame that the pension funds do not acknowledge their social responsibility”, says Klaus Hansen (chair of Lejernes LO, i.e. the largest trade union in Denmark). (Jyllandsposten, October 17, 2002, p. 3)

Issue: *branding, beer, values*

“We would like to be perceived as a sophisticated beer, but neither as a Ford nor as a Rolls Royce. Rather as an Audi. We must signal more exclusivity but also community, humour, cosmopolitan values and social responsibility. That is why we have had all our country managers together to discuss values”, says Alex Myers, international marketing director in Carlsberg Breweries”.
(Jyllandsposten, November 7, Business, p. 3)

Issue: *early retirement pension, flexjobs, government*

“With the reform of the “early retirement pension”, that was decided last fall, the government hopes to approach its goals. It strengthens the companies’ social responsibility and should lead to more flexjobs”. (Jyllandsposten, March 11, 1. section , p. 4)

Above we have shown how our empirical data points at ambiguous motives, stakeholders and issues in the debate on CSR. Our findings point at multiple motives, multiple stakeholders and multiple issues that emerge in the representation of CSR in the business press. The high number of articles not pointing at any motive, stakeholder or coherent issue contributes to the imprecision and inconsistent picture of CSR. This reading of the data leaves us – and the public opinion – with an open-ended space for interpretation and sense-making of CSR in almost whatever direction we may wish. In the following we discuss the potential value and limitations of such interpretative openness in the media's take on CSR.

6. Discussion

We have shown how the business press does not provide clarity in their representation of CSR. In our data there is not a coherent motive nor a dominant stakeholder and neither a single prevalent issue that is demarcated as the most important definition of CSR but rather a plethora of motives, stakeholders and issues lining up argumentations to reap the benefits of the positives associations connected to CSR efforts. While this ambiguity signifies a lack of clarity and may cause frustration among scholars, we contend that there are potential benefits from framing CSR within a sphere of strategic ambiguity in the Danish business press. In fact, we contend that the business press has most to gain by representing CSR in a mode of strategic ambiguity. In the following we unfold the argument.

Eisenberg's work on the productive roles of strategic ambiguity, point our attention to the productive role of strategic ambiguity in the business press' representation of CSR. Other research has also pointed to the inherent ambiguity in management (March and Olsen, 1970; Weick, 1976; March, 2003) and the potential advantages of ambiguity for managers (Weick, 2001). Also Pascale and Athos (1981:94) have argued for the risk of clarity as they claim that managers generally show much "trust in increasing the clarity of communication between people, especially when the disagreements are substantive. Getting a currently hopeless impasse clear is often unwise and likely to make things worse." In particular it has been suggested that the use of strategic ambiguity is advantageous when coping with multiple and often incompatible expectations from stakeholders (Eisenberg and Witten, 1987). This is a characteristic closely connected to CSR efforts. A variety of stakeholders hold many and often high expectations to companies' CSR engagement (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004), and further these expectations are concurrently changing (Marsden, forthcoming), and the theory of strategic ambiguity suggests that if the CSR engagement is couched in unequivocal

terms, conflict is unavoidable, and further: “when goals are stated concretely, they often are strikingly ineffective” (Eisenberg and Witten, 1987:422). Framing CSR in a consistent state of ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations and for a variety of stakeholders to identify with the concept: “Vague, metaphorical, and humorous suggestions are methods of communicating multiple messages which could not be expressed in a literal fashion.”(Eisenberg and Witten, 1987:422). Although Eisenberg and Witten primarily address communication between managers and subordinates, we find the relationship transferable to the media’s framing of CSR vis á vis its audiences. Strategic ambiguity creates room for the coexistence of multiple interpretations of CSR in the business press. It also allows the business press to incorporate various stakeholders in concurrently defining, redefining and responding to the shifting interpretations of motives, stakeholders and issues on CSR. By not taking a stance and not explicitly stating a precise definition of CSR and its dominant motives, stakeholders and issues, the business press invites various stakeholders to voice their opinions on the role of business in society. The business press provides in this sense a public space where scientists, politics and other experts may voice their different opinions and definitions of CSR in a mode that is accessible for laymen. Further, the open-ended CSR representation serves to avoid that the individual newspaper itself may be held up against previous pronouncements vis á vis their stakeholders’ changing preferences and concerns to CSR motives, stakeholders and issues. CSR is inherently a “moving target” as stakeholders’ perception of social responsibility change concurrently, and the lack of a precise definition of CSR is superior in promoting unified diversity, i.e. to ensure that the CSR concept survives as a positive and appreciated goal that is able to gather a variety of stakeholders in a shared debate on the role of business in society.

We argue that strategic ambiguity may be particularly productive in the concurrent rethinking of the role of business in the welfare state, as there is an interest in voicing and understanding a variety of stakeholder concerns. By keeping the definition as open as possible, a continuous flow of interested and committed people is admitted to contribute to the public debate: no issue is too peripheral or too exotic. Hence a large variety of stakeholders can air their concerns and contribute to the public shaping of new policies and strategies for CSR and the role of business in society. It allows stakeholders to “find out what elements of the idea, or interpretations of these elements, are most resisted or opposed” (Leitch and Davenport, 2002:131), and facilitates the spreading, circulation and diffusion of an emerging concept.

The most challenging limitation of strategic ambiguity is to decide when a sufficient level of ambiguity has been raised. In the case of an individual organisation, top management – or change agents (Leitch and Davenport, 2002) – are in charge. In the case of the business press it is not so obvious who is in charge of making a closure to the ambiguity on CSR. Neither is it obvious when to make a closure. Many newspapers simultaneously want to take advantage of the attention to the concept. As long as the concept of CSR carries a positive association that spurs interest and contributes to “selling newspapers”, the business press itself does not necessarily have an interest in providing a closure to the ambiguity. In line with Eisenberg we may argue that CSR in Denmark is still a concept that is in need of finding out what elements or interpretation is most resisted or opposed and hence requires strategic ambiguity. However, we may also ask ourselves what are the implications if time is stretched and no closure is made on CSR in the business press? After all, our study depicts ten years of strategic ambiguity in the Danish business press, and we suggest that another possible implication of such a long period of strategic ambiguity on CSR is that it becomes watered down to a relativistic, harmless and complacent concept encompassing any decision and any action. As it is our hope that this does not happen, and that CSR rather develops into a strong concept offering challenges to the changing role of business in society, we suggest that more in-depth research is needed to analyse the concurrent encompassing of all subjects and all arguments to be embraced by the concept of CSR.

7. Conclusion

This paper addressed the role of the Danish business press in the construction and diffusion of Corporate Social Responsibility. We argued for the importance of such media constructions, not just in the co-production, sense-making and content determination of the concept, but also as a mediator and translator between different stakeholders in the concept. Our empirical analysis of the coverage of CSR in the Danish business press revealed that CSR gained broader attention in the Danish Business Press in the late 1990s, thus confirming previous research about the coverage in the “Financial Times”. In the case of Denmark, government initiatives on the inclusive labour market and corporate governance appear to be primary drivers and initiators for the spread of and growing media attention to CSR. This seems to confirm the specific importance of public authorities in Nordic welfare states, also when discussing practices and responsibilities in the private sector. However, once the concept of CSR had been implemented in public discourse about the relation

between business and society, a variety of stakeholders participated in further media constructions and discussions of the concept.

Further findings confirm the openness of the CSR concept in terms of sense making and meaning ascription. As the dominant part of our data does not point to any motive for what is driving companies towards a CSR engagement, as we identified various stakeholders setting the agenda for CSR and various motives to engage in CSR, and as we identified a variety of issues related to CSR. All these findings attach ambiguity and interpretative room to the CSR-concept, hence preventing clarity and consensus.

We contend that such lack of such clarity is an advantage in the emergence of CSR in the welfare state. The Danish welfare state is experiencing a number of challenges and the role of business is changing in the wake of globalisation. In the scope of these challenges, the ambiguity of the CSR-concept opens up for new definitions and discussions of the relation between business and society in the Danish welfare state. Refreezing such new definitions and discussions by determining CSR too strict and too fast could in the shade of these challenges be a disadvantage in practical terms, despite of the scientific quest for terminological clarity.

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