Asian Journal of Communication
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajc20

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Version of record first published: 10 May 2012

To cite this article: Lu Tang (2012): Media discourse of corporate social responsibility in China: a content analysis of newspapers, Asian Journal of Communication, 22:3, 270-288

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2012.662515

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Media discourse of corporate social responsibility in China: a content analysis of newspapers

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(Received 17 January 2011; final version received 7 September 2011)

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) in China is an issue of global concern. China’s business sector has been facing criticisms both at home and abroad for its unsatisfactory records on environmental conservation, business transparency, labor conditions, and product safety. Even some multinational corporations are said to have lowered their ethical standards when they operate in China. Media are a major stakeholder in defining and promoting CSR, and media coverage of CSR sets the agendas for the public and, to some extent, for corporations, by raising awareness about CSR issues and selectively emphasizing certain aspects of CSR. Guided by theories of agenda setting, framing, and agenda building, this paper reports a content analysis of the CSR coverage in five leading Chinese newspapers in 2009 and shows that China’s newspapers predominately define CSR as companies’ responsibilities towards the community, employees, and customers. Furthermore, the country’s leading newspapers have yet to play an active role in facilitating a social dialogue about CSR, as they often adopt an uncritical attitude and a celebratory tone in their CSR reporting and allow corporations and the government to dominate the journalistic discourse of CSR.

Keywords: journalism; content analysis; Mainland China; newspaper; corporate social responsibility

Introduction

Given their increasing power and influence on the economic, political, social, ecological, and cultural conditions of the world (Castells, 1997), today’s corporations are being evaluated by a variety of stakeholders not only for their financial performances but also by their social and ethical performances. Whether companies conduct business in a socially responsible manner is to a certain extent influenced by what other stakeholders expect of them (Clarkson, 1995). These social expectations are communicated through dialogues, debate, criticism, advocacy campaigns, and legislations. Corporate social responsibility (CSR), as a relatively new concept, is being constantly constructed and reconstructed discursively through the negotiations among different stakeholders, including corporations, governments, customers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, and the public. Thus, it is imperative for communication scholars to study how CSR is conceptualized and communicated by various stakeholders in order to understand companies’ social and ethical performances.

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Media play an indispensable role in the dialogues around CSR (Zhang & Swanson, 2006). They can be a channel through which corporations communicate to the public. Media can also function as an independent monitor of corporations’ practices that safeguards interest of the public. Or they can be a stakeholder that actively participates in the negotiation of CSR (Chaudhri, 2007). How media tell their stories about CSR have significant impacts on the public and policy makers’ expectations of companies and eventually whether and to what extent companies will conduct their business in a socially responsible manner.

CSR is an issue of global concern. With the rise of global production, marketing, and supply, the practices of companies in one country have broader influences on the consumers, companies, and publics abroad. The rise of China’s economy has given the country the name 'workshop of the world'. However, China’s business sector has faced extensive criticisms both at home and abroad because of its unsatisfactory CSR performance in areas such as workers’ rights, environmental conservation, business transparency, and product safety. The country’s labor standard has been denounced as a ‘race to the bottom’, as the manufacturing industry in the country is notorious for maintaining long hours, paying below the minimum wage, and failing to provide a healthy and safe work environment (Chan, 2003, p. 41). At the same time, China is said to be choking on its own growth as the country is ignoring the environment in pursuit of economic development (Kahn & Yardley, 2007). Recent years have also witnessed major scandals associated with the quality and safety of products made in China. For instance, Mattel toys manufactured in China were found to contain lead, which ended in a national recall in the United States in 2007. One year later, millions of consumers in China were astonished to find out that they had been feeding their young children with baby formula contaminated with poisonous chemicals that led to kidney failure.

The dire societal consequences of these Chinese companies’ failures to perform up-to-par socially and ethically make it imperative to understand the rationales behind their practices. One way of approaching this question is by examining how the news media in China portray the issue of CSR. However, extant research fails to adequately address this question. To fill this gap in literature, this paper presents a theoretically driven content analysis of China’s five leading governmental and metropolitan newspapers’ CSR coverage in 2009. The findings of this descriptive study provide insights into how the country’s news media define and discuss corporation’s responsibilities towards society. Given the power of mass media in shaping public opinion and policy agenda, this study also discusses the practical implications of such media discourse on CSR. Finally, it provides useful information for advocacy groups and NGOs that want to promote alternative CSR discourses in China.

Corporate social responsibility discourse

Recent years have witnessed the increasing popularity of terms such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate strategic volunteerism and philanthropy, corporate citizenship, and sustainable development in the mainstream business literature and multinational business practices (Carroll, 2008). While scholars in the West have taken these different approaches to CSR, most agree that corporations have an obligation towards their employees and society beyond mere business
interests. Carroll (1979) proposed one of the most widely adopted typology of CSR in the West, which defines CSR as existing on four levels: economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary. Economic responsibility centers on corporate economic return to society in terms of goods and services. Legal responsibility confines corporations with legal constraints so as to maintain regular social norms. Ethical responsibility represents society’s expectations of corporations. Specifically speaking, it includes equal opportunity, fair payment, environment protection, the protection of consumers’ rights, and so on. Finally, discretionary responsibility refers to corporations’ voluntary contribution to community welfare beyond economic, legal, and ethical considerations.

Given the business community’s broad acceptance of such terms, CSR can be defined as a social discourse. According to Foucault (1995) discourse is a body of knowledge or way of thinking and talking about a phenomenon that constitutes social reality for a group. In this way, discourses are social institutions with the power to legitimize one way of thinking over another (Foucault, 1995).

Corporations are actively participating in the construction of the CSR discourse to legitimize their practices, and corporations’ own CSR discourse has been frequently studied (Weaver, Trevino, & Cochran, 1999). Researchers have examined corporate CSR discourse by using content analysis to analyze corporations’ texts, such as their CSR reports and websites (e.g. Chaudhi & Wang, 2007; Gill, Dickinson, & Scharl, 2008; Sweeney & Coughlan, 2008; Tang & Li, 2009) or by investigating how management defines CSR through interviews with business executives in different national or industry contexts (e.g. Gulyás, 2009; Wang & Chaudhi, 2009).

Other stakeholders are also participating in defining CSR. According to the Stakeholder Theory, stakeholders are groups that are influenced by or have a claim on corporations (Clarkson, 1995). Primary stakeholders are those groups essential to the continued operation of a corporation, such as shareholders, customers, and employees, while secondary stakeholders refer to those groups who are influenced by or have influences on the corporation, such as media, NGOs, and other interest groups (Clarkson, 1995). Researchers have been studying how various stakeholders engage in the discussion of what constitutes corporation’s responsibilities towards society.

NGOs have been actively participating in the construction of CSR discourse. For instance, Kovacs (2006) studied the ways that broadcasting NGOs in the UK framed CSR and found they were responsible for pushing the CSR discourse related to the broadcasting industry from that of accountability, which required a low level of commitment from companies, to that of the real CSR associated with a higher par for performance.

Much attention has been paid to examining the conflicts and interactions between the CSR discourses of corporations and NGOs. Welford (1997) looked at the negotiation between corporations and the non-profit sector on environmentalism and concluded, ‘industry has hijacked the more radical environmental debate taking it out of its traditional discourses and placing it in a liberal-productive frame of reference’ (p. 25). Brown (2010) examined the environmental discourses of NGOs and corporations in UK by comparing the words used by the two groups and concluded that corporations appropriate particular words used by NGOs in constructing their own discourse of environmentalism. Åhlström (2010) studied the CSR discourses of civil society organizations (CSOs) and international garment
company H&M and found that CSOs used a ‘responsible business’ discourse to challenge the ‘profitable business’ discourse used by H&M and, in doing so, threatened the legitimacy of the company. In response, H&M created a ‘responsible business’ discourse that was decoupled from its actual practices.

In addition to NGOs, government also participates in the construction of CSR discourse through policy making and other channels, even though its role as a stakeholder is somewhat contested in the Western liberal market context (Moon & Hyun, 2009). For example, Kerr, Johnston, & Beatson (2008) examined how the Australian government used advertising to inform different stakeholders of the policy that protected their rights. Governments in certain countries are especially keen on promoting their own versions of CSR. Tang and Li (2009) found that the Chinese government has explicitly rejected the Western discourse of CSR introduced by global companies and Western NGOs. Instead, it has been introducing its own version of CSR centered on environmental sustainability and the Confucius principle of ‘putting people first’ with the goal of building a ‘harmonious society’ (Hu, 2007).

Media, as another powerful stakeholder, are the focus of this study. Despite its apparent importance, media’s CSR discourse has been examined in only a few studies (e.g. Dickson & Eckman, 2008; Tench, Bowd, & Jones, 2007; Zhang & Swanson, 2006). Zhang and Swanson (2006) analyzed the content of 84 articles on CSR from 33 US newspapers and 18 international newspapers in January and February of 2005 and categorized their coverage of CSR into the following frames: objective use of CSR (29%), i.e. defining CSR as companies meeting and exceeding the ethical, legal, and economic expectations of society; praise of corporate achievement (18%); CSR as community and social expectation (27%); CSR as a necessary business practice (6%); and negative framing of CSR as public relations (15%). This study is limited in that it only reported the approach adopted in news articles on CSR in terms of these frames. Furthermore, this study did not acknowledge the possibility that multiple frames can be used at the same time. Finally, the small sample size and the unclear criteria used in sampling limited the generalizability of the study’s conclusions. Tench, Bowd, and Jones (2007) conducted interviews and surveys with journalists in the UK to explore their perceptions of the definition of CSR, the key elements of CSR, key stakeholders, level of CSR engagement in UK, and rationales of CSR. They also examined the ways in which these journalists were likely to report CSR. Compared to Zhang and Swanson (2006), Tench et al. (2007) presented a more systematic study of media report on CSR; however, this study was based solely on the self-reports of journalists. A systematic study of the content of media coverage of CSR can potentially facilitate researchers’ understanding of the media discourse of CSR. Furthermore, such a study conducted in the Chinese context will provide both Chinese and Western scholars, NGOs, and activists a starting point in understanding the media discourse about CSR in China.

The agenda setting role of media

Theories of agenda setting and framing explain the effects of mass media on public opinion and policy. According to the agenda setting theory, mass media set the public agenda and policy agenda by emphasizing certain issues and figures (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The agenda setting effect of mass media is based on
the following two assumptions. First, media do not just reflect reality but create reality. Second, the more an issue or figure is covered in the media, the higher its salience (Weaver, 1984). Framing, or second-level agenda setting, is the process through which mass media tell their audience how to make sense of the issue by selectively highlighting certain attributes and downplaying others (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). The effects of agenda setting and framing have been widely documented in media research (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002).

In terms of the media’s coverage of corporations and their social responsibilities, several aspects stand out as important in defining CSR: the major stakeholders mentioned and the major CSR activities mentioned. Those stakeholders given more coverage in the news are likely to be considered more important by the public, while those stakeholders receiving less attention in the media tend to be relegated to secondary status (Moon & Hyun, 2009). Furthermore, media’s coverage of different CSR issues, namely public philanthropy (e.g. contribution to education, arts and culture, public health, sports, environment, etc), labor conditions (e.g. employee welfare, development, and equal opportunity), customers’ rights (product quality and product safety), responsibilities towards suppliers, and responsibilities towards shareholders, will have an impact on the importance the public accord to these CSR issues. This leads to the first two research questions (RQs):

*RQ1:* What are the major stakeholders discussed in Chinese newspapers’ coverage of CSR?
*RQ2:* What are the major CSR issues covered in Chinese newspapers?

One aspect of framing is the valence or tones used in reporting (Kious & Wu, 2008). There are generally three tones in media reports of CSR. Positive tone is utilized when a firm is praised for its CSR activities; negative tone is applied to a firm involved in unethical behaviors, which often lead to bruised reputations; and a neutral/mixed tone is associated with a declarative news report without any evaluative modifiers or a news article that offers both positive and negative evaluation of CSR. By resorting to the evaluative criteria highlighted in the news, one will discover the emotional dimension of the news report, which will be absorbed by its audience—the public. In terms of the study of CSR framing, Wang (2007) and Wang and Anderson (2008) found that the valence of the news report about a corporation’s CSR performance influences the audience’s positive or negative judgment of the corporation. This leads to RQ3:

*RQ3:* What is the valence of CSR reporting in Chinese newspapers?

**Agenda setting vs. agenda building**

More recently, researchers put aside the repeatedly asked question of ‘how media shape the public agenda?’ and asked instead ‘who sets the media agenda?’ (McCombs, 1992). The agenda building theory has been proposed to explain the influence of corporations, governments, political candidates, and foreign nations on the media agenda (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Studies showed that 40% to 50% of the news content in daily newspapers in the United States originates from press releases of corporations and other organizations (Sachsman, 1976; Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1995). Corporations are actively engaged in building the media agenda. Public
relations professionals have a symbiotic relationship with journalists (Sriramesh, 2003). Public relation professionals have been routinely providing information subsidies (such as press releases) to news media so that the corporations’ message can reach the public (Curtin, 1999). They manage to offset, undermine, or mitigate the influence of the news media on the public via serving as sources, purchased advertorials, invited columns, or letters to the editor (Lerbinger, 2006). Agenda building is also found in political communication when governments, political candidates, and foreign nations try to influence public opinion by maneuvering the agenda and frames of the media. For instance, Kious et al. (2009) found that the number of press releases by political candidates during a campaign is positively correlated with these candidates’ salience in the media. Sheafer and Gabay (2009) examined the battle of governments of two rival nations: Israel and Palestine in international news media by influencing the agendas and frames of the news media in the US and UK. NGOs also engage in building the media agenda. For instance, Moon and Shim (2008) demonstrated the agenda-building role of environmental groups by establishing the relationship between the amount of press release of environmental groups during a major environmental disaster and the amount of coverage the issue received in the news media in South Korea.

While the agenda building theory has been developed in the Western context, it has been proven useful in explaining the agenda and frame of the Chinese media. Existing research has focused on the agenda building efforts by the Chinese government and NGOs. Yu (2006) examined the coverage of HIV/AIDS in People’s Daily, the leading government newspaper in China, and found that political figures played the most significant role in influencing the newspaper’s agenda on HIV/AIDS reporting. Pan (2008) found that after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, Chinese media’s report was directly built by the government’s political agenda. Yang and Calhoun (2007) studied the agenda building efforts of environmental NGOs in China and argued that these NGOs have successfully built a ‘green public sphere’ through both traditional media and the Internet that allows a broad range of stakeholders to debate environment issues and even reverse governmental polices (p. 213).

In the social dialogue about what constitutes corporations’ responsibilities towards society in China, many stakeholder groups would like to have their voices heard. To explore which stakeholders influence the media agenda about CSR in China and whether different stakeholders will frame CSR differently, the following two RQs are asked:

RQ4: Who influences the media agenda concerning CSR?
RQ5: What are the differences in the frames used by different stakeholders in discussing CSR?

CSR in China is an issue closely related to globalization. CSR itself is a Western concept that has only recently been introduced to China. The Chinese establishment has held an ambivalent attitude towards the Western notion of CSR promoted by some Chinese intellectuals and grass-root NGOs (Chan, 2005). Thus, the last two research questions address the extent to which China’s news media focus on global or local companies’ responsibilities towards society, and the extent to which they refer to the Western discourses and practices of CSR.
RQ6a: To what extent does China’s journalistic CSR discourse involve global or local companies?
RQ6b: To what extent does China’s journalistic CSR discourse refer to Western standards of CSR?

Methods

Sample
This study examined the content of five leading newspapers in China to assess the journalistic discourse of CSR: one national newspaper (People’s Daily) and four local newspapers (Guangzhou Daily, Xinming Evening News, Yangzi Evening News, and Chongqing Evening News). Among them, People’s Daily (Ren Min Ri Bao) and Guangzhou Daily (Guangzhou Ri Bao) are government newspapers available to the general public with highest and second highest circulations.1 Yangzi Evening News (Yangzi Wan Bao), Xinmin Evening News (Xin Min Wan Bao) and Chongqing Evening News (Chongqing Wan Bao) are metropolitan newspapers based in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Chongqing, three cities with top 10 populations in China. Yangzi Evening News and Xinmin Evening News rank first and fifth among all local metropolitan newspapers in China. These newspapers were also chosen because their digital archives were available online.

Second, these newspapers’ coverage of CSR in 2009 was identified by searching the online databases using the following search terms: corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, and social responsibility. All articles that were related to social responsibilities of not-for-profit organizations and individuals (i.e. the social responsibilities of the youth or the social responsibilities of the government) were excluded from the sample. In the end, a total of 814 news articles were identified (People’s Daily 183, Guangzhou Daily 156, Xinmin Evening News 162, Yangzi Evening News 175, and Chongqing Evening News 138). Finally, systematic sampling was conducted to choose 50% of these news articles to be included in the content analysis.2

Unit of analysis and measures
The unit of analysis was each individual article on CSR. Each article in the sample was coded for the following variables: type of articles (news articles that actively engaged in dialogue about CSR, news articles that only mentioned CSR once without any elaboration on it, articles about CSR awards and rankings, and surreptitious advertisement), types of companies mentioned (state-owned Chinese companies, private Chinese companies, global/foreign companies, more than one type of company, and none), and industries (real estate, automobile, energy, food and beverage, consumer products, banking, telecommunications, IT and computers, alcohol and cigarette, others, and multiple industries).

To answer RQ1, the stakeholders discussed were coded, including: community,3 customers, suppliers, shareholders, and employees. One article could cover more than one type of stakeholder. To answer RQ2, the coder coded the themes of CSR discussed: companies’ responsibilities towards communities (different types of public philanthropy, including contribution to primary and secondary education, contribution to higher education, disaster relief, contribution to arts and culture, sponsoring
sports events, contribution to health and disability, and contribution to development and poverty reduction), responsibilities towards customer stakeholders (product safety and product quality), responsibilities towards employees (providing jobs, employee health and safety, employee welfare, employee equal opportunity, employee’s rights to participate in decision making, and others), shareholders, and suppliers. The tone of each news article was coded (positive, negative, neutral/mixed) to answer RQ3. To explore RQ4, stakeholders that influence the CSR coverage in these newspapers were coded (government, corporations, intellectuals, NGOs, media, and others). For instance, if a news article contained a direct quote from the government, it was coded as ‘influenced by government.’ If there existed quotes from multiple types of stakeholders, the news article would be coded as ‘multiple stakeholders.’ It needs to be acknowledged that to precisely measure which stakeholder influences the media agenda, one needs to examine who has successfully put their stories in the news. In this paper, direct quotations were used to measure the extent to which the voices of different stakeholders were heard in the news reports and to gauge whether these stakeholders emphasized different aspects of CSR. While this was not the ideal method for measuring the discourses of different stakeholders, examining whom reporters choose to quote in news stories could shed light on whose voices get heard and whose interests are represented (Burch & Harry, 2004). Answering RQ6a relied on the coding about the types of company mentioned (i.e. whether Western/multinational corporations are discussed). To answer RQ6b, each news article was coded for whether it included any reference to how CSR was defined or practiced in the West.

**Coder training and intercoder reliability**

A graduate student served as the primary coder and, after 15 hours of training, coded all the news stories in the sample. The author coded a randomly selected 15% of the stories and checked for intercoder reliability. The intercoder reliabilities ranged between .70 to 1 with an average of .918 (percentage agreement).

**Results**

Four hundred and six articles were coded and included in the data analysis (People’s Daily 91, Guangzhou Daily 78, Yangzi Evening News 88, Xinning Evening News 81, and Chongqing Evening News 68). Among these articles, 153 (37.7%) actively discussed CSR, 153 (37.7%) only mentioned CSR once without any discussion, 65 (16%) were surreptitious advertisement, i.e. advertisement disguised as regular news, and 35 (8.6%) covered CSR related awards and rankings. In terms of the types of companies discussed, private Chinese companies (n = 172, 42.4%) were most likely to be mentioned, followed by state-owned Chinese companies (n = 81, 20.0%), global/foreign companies (n = 32, 7.9%), and joint ventures (n = 16, 3.9%). These companies belong to the following industries: real estate (n = 55, 13.5%), automobile (n = 21, 7.6%), food and beverage (n = 29, 7.1%), banking and investment (n = 29, 7.1%), telecommunication (n = 29, 7.1%), energy (n = 23, 5.7%), consumer appliance (n = 19, 4.7%), media (n = 7, 1.7%), alcohol and cigarette (n = 6, 1.5%), and IT and computers (n = 4, 1.0%).
The first RQ asked which stakeholders were mentioned in China’s news report of CSR. The results of the content analysis showed that community was the stakeholder most often mentioned \((n = 195, 48\%)\), followed by employees \((n = 105, 25.9\%)\), customers \((n = 86, 21.2\%)\), suppliers \((n = 13, 3.2\%)\), and shareholders \((n = 10, 2.5\%)\). (For descriptive statistics of all RQs except RQ5, please see Table 1.)

The second RQ examined the themes of CSR in Chinese newspapers. As community stakeholder was the most prominent stakeholder, public philanthropic contributions to community received most coverage in the news. The following themes of CSR in the area of public philanthropy were coded in order of descending frequencies: environment conservation \((n = 72, 17.7\%)\), contribution to primary and secondary education \((n = 56, 13.8\%)\), disaster relief \((n = 45, 11.1\%)\), arts and culture \((n = 31, 7.6\%)\), health and disability \((n = 30, 7.4\%)\), development and poverty reduction \((n = 28, 6.9\%)\), contribution to higher education \((n = 22, 5.4\%)\), and sports \((n = 21, 5.2\%)\). Employee was the second most prominent stakeholder. Providing job opportunities was emphasized as companies’ most salient responsibility to employees and was mentioned in 83 articles \((20.4\%)\). This was followed by employee welfare \((n = 49, 12.1\%)\), employee development \((n = 25, 6.2\%)\), employee health and safety \((n = 7, 1.7\%)\), and equal opportunities \((n = 3, 0.7\%)\). When customers were the stakeholder, product quality \((n = 81, 20\%)\) and product safety \((n = 37, 9.1\%)\) were the two responsibilities discussed. As shareholders and suppliers were seldom mentioned as stakeholders, I did not include detailed coding of CSR themes related to suppliers and shareholders.

RQ3 explored the valence or evaluative tone of newspaper articles covering CSR. It was found that most of the articles on CSR adopted a positive tone \((n = 272, 67\%)\). The second largest group of articles had either a neutral or mixed tone \((n = 80, 19.7\%)\). Only 54 articles \((13.3\%)\) adopted a negative tone.

RQ4 addressed the constituents who influenced the media agenda. The results of the content analysis showed the following entities were most likely to be directly quoted in news articles on CSR: corporations \((n = 149, 36.7\%)\), government \((n = 71, 18.0\%)\), NGOs \((n = 14, 3.4\%)\), and academics \((n = 8, 2.0\%)\). Forty-nine articles \((12.1\%)\) were coded as influenced by multiple stakeholders.

The fifth RQ explored the differences among the CSR discourses influenced by government, corporations, NGOs, and academics. The small number of news articles quoting academics \((n = 8)\) did not allow a systematic understanding of the CSR discourse built by academics in media and thus those articles citing academics were not included in the comparison. A series of chi-square tests were run to compare the likelihood with which the governmental, corporate, and NGO discourses would mention the five following stakeholders: community, customer, shareholder, supplier, and employee (for descriptive statistics and results of chi-square tests for RQ5, see Table 2). Holm’s sequential Bonferroni procedure was used to adjust the \(p\) value as multiple tests were run simultaneously (Abdi, 2010). Chi-square tests found significant differences among the discourses of these groups in their likelihood of mentioning the community as a stakeholder \((\chi^2 = 21.851, \ df = 2, \ p = .000, \ adjusted \ p = .000)\). Follow-up chi-square tests were conducted on pairs of discourses to further explore the differences among them. It was found that there was a noticeable resemblance among corporate discourse and NGO discourse with no statistically significant differences between them concerning all five stakeholder-categories. However, the governmental discourse was significantly less likely to mention
Table 1. Comparing the discourses of government, corporation, NGOs and academics.

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<th>Government discourse ($n = 73$)</th>
<th>Corporate discourse ($n = 149$)</th>
<th>Academic discourse ($n = 9$)</th>
<th>NGO discourse ($n = 14$)</th>
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<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to the West</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Results of chi-square tests comparing the governmental, corporate and NGO discourses.

Comparing the discourses of government, corporations, and NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Governmental discourse</th>
<th>Corporate discourse</th>
<th>NGO discourse</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Original $p$</th>
<th>Adjusted $p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>18 (24.7%)</td>
<td>82 (55.0%)</td>
<td>10 (71.4%)</td>
<td>21.851</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>16 (21.9%)</td>
<td>34 (22.8%)</td>
<td>3 (21.4%)</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.984</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>28 (38.4%)</td>
<td>32 (21.5%)</td>
<td>4 (28.6%)</td>
<td>7.079</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shareholder</td>
<td>1 (1.4%)</td>
<td>5 (3.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1.168</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.558</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier</td>
<td>5 (6.8%)</td>
<td>2 (1.3%)</td>
<td>1 (7.1%)</td>
<td>5.1772</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing the discourses of government and corporations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Governmental discourse</th>
<th>Corporate discourse</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Original $p$</th>
<th>Adjusted $p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18.263</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.880</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.078</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.032*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shareholder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.735</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.866</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing the discourses of government and NGOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Governmental discourse</th>
<th>NGO discourse</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Original $p$</th>
<th>Adjusted $p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11.774</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.005*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.484</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.487</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shareholder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.194</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.660</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplier</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01.
community stakeholders than was the corporate discourse ($\chi^2 = 18.263$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$, adjusted $p = .000$) or the NGO discourse ($\chi^2 = 11.774$, $df = 1$, $p = .001$, adjusted $p = .005$). Finally, the government discourse was significantly more likely to address the employee stakeholder than was the corporate discourse ($\chi^2 = 7.078$, $df = 1$, $p = .008$, adjusted $p = .032$).

Finally, RQ6a and RQ6b explored the extent to with China’s journalistic discourse of CSR had a global or a local emphasis. It was found that China’s news coverage on CSR was largely focused inwardly. Only 7.9% of the news articles on CSR discussed the CSR of global/foreign companies, and only 4.7% the news articles referred to how CSR was defined and practiced in the West.

Discussion

China’s newspaper coverage of CSR

The result of this content analysis study of leading Chinese newspapers offers an initial peek into the country’s news coverage of CSR. Community was the most salient stakeholder in China’s media coverage of CSR. Accordingly, community involvement through public philanthropy, such as environment conservation, contribution to education, disaster relief and development, and contributions to arts, culture, and sports, were often emphasized.

Employees were the second most visible stakeholder in Chinese newspapers’ coverage of CSR. Interestingly, providing job opportunity was considered to be the most important responsibility towards employees ($n = 83$, 20.4%). It was mentioned almost twice as often as the second kind of responsibility towards employees: employee welfare ($n = 47$, 12.1%). This emphasis was unique in that providing jobs was not usually associated with companies’ responsibilities towards employees in the Western context. For instance, the United Nations Global Compact, which was considered as one of the universal standards of CSR in the Western context, did not include providing job opportunities as part of companies’ obligations towards society. These news stories tended to emphasize providing jobs as companies’ obligation towards society/country rather than towards employees themselves because when companies provided jobs, they contributed to social stability and the building of a ‘harmonious society’. This is also the strategic goal of the Chinese government (Hu, 2007). On the other hand, themes of responsibilities towards employees often found in the Western context, such as employee development, health and safety, and equal opportunities, received less coverage.

The third most frequently mentioned stakeholder group was the customers. Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of scandals related to the quality and safety of products made in China, which was reflected in the newspaper reports. The overwhelming number of reports about the poisonous baby formula by Sanlu Group, one of the top diary producers in China, made food safety a salient issue in the journalistic discourse of CSR. Other stakeholders, such as shareholders and suppliers, received almost no mention in the news, only appearing in 3.2% and 2.5% of the news articles, respectively.
Advertisement or news report? The unusually positive tone of the CSR news report

What strikes as lacking in Chinese newspapers’ coverage of CSR is a critical stance. Only about a third of all the articles coded (37.7%) engaged in some kind of discussion of what constituted corporations’ responsibility towards society and the evaluation of the performances of individual corporations. More than a third of the news articles (37.7%) were news reports on other topics and only mentioned CSR once without any elaboration on what CSR was and what it included. The existence of a large number of news articles that only briefly mentioned CSR could potentially increase the salience of CSR as an issue among the public. However, these articles contributed little to the dialogue of what constituted CSR. Another large group of news articles constituted surreptitious advertisements by individual companies (16%), in which the news media allowed corporations to set the public agenda on CSR.

In conjunction with these results, Chinese newspapers’ CSR coverage adopted a largely celebratory tone. Most of the news articles took a positive tone (67.0%), praising companies for their contribution to society, or a neutral or mixed tone (19.7%). Only 13.3% of all news articles on CSR adopted a negative tone, criticizing the CSR performance of individual companies or the business community in general. This finding offers interesting comparison with the findings of Zhang and Swanson (2006)’s study of CSR news in US and International newspapers, which discovered the percentage of news articles on CSR that adopted a positive, neutral/mixed, or negative tone to be 47%, 36%, and 15%, respectively. Thus, compared to their Western counterparts, Chinese newspapers were more likely to adopt a positive tone that promoted companies’ CSR achievements and less likely to adopt a neutral/mixed tone, through which objective discussion and evaluation of CSR occurred.

One reason for the overtly celebratory tone found in Chinese newspapers’ CSR coverage was that 16% of these articles were surreptitious advertisements, such as advertorials (i.e. corporate-sponsored advertisements) disguised as regular news reports or editorials (Kim, Pasadeos, & Barban, 2001). Such news articles are also called ‘soft advertisements’ in the Chinese media. Soft advertisements are often published as regular news stories in Chinese newspapers. It is not unusual for Chinese journalists to demand or accept monetary payments or the ‘red envelope’ from companies in exchange for the placement of such company sponsored news articles in regular news sections (Zhang, 2009). Companies from three industries were mostly likely to use surreptitious advertisements: the real estate industry (n = 22, 33.8%), auto industry (n = 12, 18.5%), and telecommunications industry (n = 9, 13.8%). In the case of the real estate industry, a large percentage of these advertorials were designed to promote new housing developments. News stories in which real estate developers highlighted CSR achievements were often praising the above-average community building efforts and environmental-friendly practices of real estate companies. Most of these news articles also praised real estate companies’ contributions to the progress of urbanization. They then went on to introduce new housing developments and toll free numbers of sales departments. Another prominent form of surreptitious advertisements featured interviews with business owners or CEOs that were intended to promote a company’s brand or products. Surreptitious advertisements such as advertorials have been found to more effectively promote a company, brand, or product than do traditional advertisements. Because their placement, type size, typeface, and other stylistic features mimic regular news
articles, surreptitious advertisements are often taken as regular editorial or news content by readers and gain high source credibility (Kim et al., 2001). Scholars have pointed out the ethical problems associated with surreptitious advertisements, calling them ‘information pollution’ (Cameron & Ju-Pak, 2000, p. 65).

In summary, the fact that only a third of the news articles engaged in active discussion of CSR and only a third adopted a neutral or negative tone might indicate that leading newspapers in China have not played an active role in the societal dialogue about what constitutes CSR. This phenomenon might have broader, long-term ramifications as the Chinese news media’s failure to play the role of the public watchdog or whistle blower may allow companies to operate under minimum public surveillance.

**Different stakeholders, different discourses**

Media agenda is influenced by stakeholders such as governments, corporations, and other interest groups through the process of agenda building (McCombs, 1992). This study found that Chinese corporations were taking an active role in shaping the media agenda in terms of how CSR should be defined and practiced. Sixteen percent of the news articles on CSR were surreptitious advertisements coming directly from corporations. Furthermore, corporations were cited as direct sources in 34.6% of the articles that actively engaged in CSR discussion, in 20% of the articles that only mentioned CSR briefly, and in 14.3% of the articles on CSR awards and rankings. This study confirms the claim made by Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 48) more than two decades ago that ‘public, or social, responsibility has become a major reason for an organization to have a public relations function’. The prominence of corporations’ voice in Chinese newspapers is not surprising once one understands some of the common journalistic practices in China. Lo, Chan, and Pan (2005) interviewed journalists in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan on their ethical attitudes and perceived practices and found that, compared to their counterparts in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Chinese journalists were more likely to report the practice of moonlighting, i.e. journalists working a second job in a company to help them promote their products or in a PR firm.

Almost all of the news articles quoting corporations (90.6%) had a positive tone. Only one article out of 149 adopted a negative tone. According to Lo et al. (2005), 36.9% of Chinese journalists reported the practice of softening negative coverage of key advisers.

Government was clearly another major influence on the media coverage of CSR with 18% of the articles in the sample citing the Chinese government as a direct source. About a third (30.8%) of the articles on CSR in governmental newspapers quoted government as a direct source. Even among articles in non-governmental metropolitan newspapers, 8.9% of them cited the government as a source. The government discourse of CSR differed significantly from the corporate discourse in that it emphasized companies’ responsibilities towards employees, especially companies’ responsibility to provide and secure job opportunities. On the other hand, the governmental discourse was significantly less likely to define CSR in terms of a corporation’s contribution to community stakeholders through public philanthropy. This might be explained by the fact that according to the mainstream idea in China, government, instead of the private sector, was believed to be responsible for issues such as education, disaster relief, and poverty reduction in China. Furthermore, when
the governmental discourse mentioned corporations’ responsibility to employees, it often discussed providing jobs as companies’ primary responsibility to society, and equated creating and securing employment opportunities with contribution to societal stability. As a result, while the governmental and corporate discourses appeared to be saying different things, they ultimately shared some similar ideas about CSR.

NGOs, which constitute a major contributor to CSR discourse in other parts of the world, had less voice in China’s news media and were quoted as sources in only 3.4% of CSR articles. This is not surprising given the unique status of Chinese NGOs. Chinese NGOs typically have little input in policy making, and some of the largest NGOs in China, such as the Hope Project and the Red Cross, are ‘governmental non-governmental organizations’ and viewed as governmental branch in carrying out charity (Young, 2002, p. 35). Thus, it was not surprising that most of the news articles quoting NGOs (71.4%) focused on companies’ philanthropic contributions to the community. Furthermore, studies in the West have typically compared the discourses of NGOs and corporations to highlight the differences, conflicts, and negotiations between these two major stakeholders (e.g., Brown, 2010; Welford, 1997). This study, in contrast, found a surprising resemblance between the NGO discourse and the corporate discourse in China. This similarity is significant because it seems that Chinese NGOs are not playing the role of the independent watchdog that scrutinizes the practices of corporations, and have yet to actively promote their own definitions of CSR. Another possible interpretation is that those NGOs that have agendas different from those of the government and corporations have not been given a voice in the mainstream news media. An examination of the types of NGOs cited in the sample indicated that most were philanthropic organizations, such as China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, China Charity Federation, China Red Cross, and Shanghai Charity Fund. Other NGOs, such as environmental groups or workers’ rights organizations, had virtually no voice in these newspapers’ discussion of CSR. This might have contributed to the emphasis on community and public philanthropy in the NGO discourse.

Another major stakeholder in defining and discussing CSR is academics, who first introduced the idea of CSR to the Chinese society. However, academics in China have been given little voice in the dialogue around CSR in the media today and are cited in only 2% of the news articles on CSR. Given the small number of samples, this paper can only draw some tentative conclusions about the academic’s CSR discourse. It seems that academics, more than any other major participants in the dialogue about CSR, were likely to mention corporations’ responsibilities towards their shareholders, i.e. corporations’ responsibility to make profit. Not surprisingly, an examination of the backgrounds and academic affiliations of the academics quoted showed that those scholars who emphasized responsibility towards shareholders were in the field of business and economics.

Seldom did Chinese news articles on CSR rely on sources from multiple stakeholders. Only 12.1% of the articles quote more than one type of stakeholders. Media scholars have been studying the issue of source diversity since the 1970s and found that the majority of news reports are dominated by elite sources: governments and executives (Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987). A news article incorporating the views and words of multiple stakeholders can be considered a site for the dialogue about CSR in the spirit of a pluralistic democracy. This is clearly not the case in China’s journalistic portrayal of the issue of CSR.
Finally, Chinese newspapers’ coverage of CSR had an internal focus, covering Chinese companies much more than global companies operating in China. News articles seldom referred to how CSR was practiced and evaluated in the Western context, despite the fact that CSR is a concept imported from the West.

Conclusions and directions for future research

Chaudhri (2007) argued that media can play three roles in CSR reporting: (1) a channel through which corporations communicate to the public; (2) an independent auditor that surveys corporations’ practices in the public interest; and (3) a stakeholder who actively participates in the negotiation of what constitutes CSR. As the first study examining CSR coverage in Chinese newspapers, this paper concludes that the country’s leading newspapers have yet to play an active role in facilitating a social dialogue about CSR. They seldom adopt a critical attitude towards the social implications of corporations’ practices and seem to have surrendered their power to corporations and the government in setting the public and policy agenda regarding CSR. Chinese newspapers often present rhetoric that is congratulatory of corporations, as more than a third of the news articles on CSR are directly fed by corporations and two thirds adopt a positive tone. The Chinese government is also actively shaping the media agenda on CSR and this is especially true of government-sponsored newspapers. Other stakeholders, such NGOs and academics, have virtually no voice in Chinese newspapers’ coverage of CSR.

The fact that CSR is a topic frequently covered in newspapers in China might lead to public awareness of the topic and the belief that corporations do have certain responsibilities towards society. However, the often one-sided and celebratory stories of CSR, which, more often than not, are fed by corporations, might also create a limited or biased understanding of what constitutes CSR. When the news media, which could be the public’s primary source of information on CSR, tell their audience that CSR is mainly public philanthropy, i.e. companies’ donating to charitable causes, the public opinion might be swayed to that direction. The predominantly celebratory tone of the media discourse of CSR, on the other hand, keep the public’s attention away from the problematic practices of companies in areas of product safety, labor practice, and pollution. While recently the Internet has become an alternative public space in China (Yang, 2009), where the wrongdoings of corporations are being disclosed and criticized, the overall positive tone found in traditional media such as newspapers might be especially detrimental for those who rely on traditional mass media as their primary source of information: the elderly, the less educated, and the less well-off members of the Chinese society. These groups are ironically the people less capable of fending for themselves against corporations’ misconducts.

This study provides some practical implications for NGOs and advocacy groups in China. The present media discourse of CSR is largely dominated by corporations and the government. To promote their causes, NGOs and advocacy groups need to gain more prominence in the media. For instance, they can gain access to the mainstream news media by providing more news releases and information subsidies.

This study takes only a snapshot view of the media’s stance on CSR in China by examining the content of leading newspapers. Further studies of China’s journalistic discourse on CSR can benefit from an examination of how CSR is portrayed in newspapers from middle- and small-sized cities or how media coverage of CSR has
changed over time. Besides traditional media such as newspapers, the Internet has emerged as a new public space for social dialogue that is relatively independent from the mainstream ideologies of government and traditional media (Rosen, 2010; Yang & Calhoun, 2007). Thus, it would be revealing to explore how CSR is conceptualized and negotiated online. Although examining media content is essential in understanding the media coverage of CSR in China, interviewing journalists and media professionals would provide first-person perspectives and potentially illustrate the rationales behind Chinese media’s CSR coverage.

Finally, since the discourse of CSR is constantly constructed and negotiated by a variety of stakeholders, future research needs to explore the interactions and negotiations among different stakeholders in this process. Case studies on specific CSR issues might be useful in shedding light on the longitudinal developments of the discourses proposed by different stakeholders and how these discourses shape and interact with each other.

Notes
1. *Cankao Xiaoxi*, or *Reference News*, is the governmental newspaper in China with highest number of circulation. However, it is only targeted at and available to Party and governmental officials and thus excluded from this study.

2. To conduct systematic sampling, all newspaper articles on CSR were given consecutive identification numbers. A random number was generated among these numbers, using online random number generator. From that on, every other article was selected to be included in the sample.

3. While a community typically refers to a neighborhood in the Western context, it is often equivalent with the whole society in the Chinese context. As a result, when a company is giving to the community, it is not giving to a specific neighborhood, but giving to society in general.

References


