

# DIALOGICAL VS. PARTISAN CSR: A CORPORATE DILEMMA IN POLARIZATION

*AUTHORS: GASTONE GUALTIERI, ZHAW SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND LAW & FRANCESCO LURATI, UNIVERSITÀ DELLA SVIZZERA ITALIANA*

# DIALOGICAL VS. PARTISAN CSR: A CORPORATE DILEMMA IN POLARIZATION

AUTHORS: GASTONE GUALTIERI, ZHAW SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND LAW & FRANCESCO LURATI, UNIVERSITÀ DELLA SVIZZERA ITALIANA

© AdobeStock | VictoriaEmerson



In polarized times “being responsible” no longer means the same thing to everyone. For some stakeholders, responsibility means advancing a cause; for others, it means exercising restraint. How can companies behave responsibly when society pulls them in opposite directions? Our study of Italian telecom companies during the 5G rollout shows that managers address this dilemma through what we call “partisan CSR”: engaging only with supportive audiences while ignoring critical ones. This selective approach may seem efficient because it reinforces shared views and relationships with favorable stakeholders while avoiding confrontation with critical ones. Yet it comes at a cost. By fueling a one-sided dialogue, companies risk deepening societal polarization, redefining responsibility around business interests rather than societal ones, and eroding the long-term trust that genuine CSR generates.

## HOW MANAGERS ADDRESS MUTUALLY DELEGITIMIZING DEMANDS

For some, digitalization is the very definition of progress. Fast, reliable connectivity is seen as a social good, forming the foundation for education, healthcare, and economic opportunity. Policymakers and institutions expect telecom companies to accelerate digital access and provide the infrastructure that makes development possible. From this perspective, fostering digitalization is not just a

business strategy but a core responsibility to society.

For others, however, digitalization looks very different. Activists and local communities warn about electromagnetic radiation, environmental costs, and the health risks of constant connectivity. In their view, responsibility does not mean increasing digitalization but limiting exposure, slowing expansion, and protecting vulnerable groups.

The same technology, two irreconcilable demands. One side demands acceleration, the other restraint. For telecom companies, this raises a fundamental dilemma: How should companies behave when society pulls them in opposite directions? Or, in other words: How can managers act responsibly when society itself disagrees on what responsibility means?

Traditionally, the dominant answer has been dialogue. CSR has been framed as listening to stakeholders, integrating their concerns, and adapting practices to demonstrate responsiveness. By engaging with society as a whole, companies could build legitimacy and reputation (Colleoni, 2013; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). At times, when expectations proved particularly fragmented or contentious, some managers have also opted for silence; a more cautious stance aimed at minimizing potential backfire. Yet dialogue has remained the ideal and expected approach for understanding, aligning with, and addressing stakeholder expectations.

*How can managers act responsibly when society itself disagrees on what responsibility means?*

frames connectivity as a fundamental right; another frames it as a fundamental threat. These are not two perspectives in the same conversation but two parallel conversations that mutually delegitimize one another. Engaging with one side validates its worldview while automatically alienating the other. Attempts to bridge them rarely succeed, because compromise is interpreted as betrayal: Reassuring activists looks like slowing down development, while reassuring institutions looks like dismissing public health.

In this fractured landscape, an all-stakeholder dialogue is impossible. Managers simply cannot rely on dialogue to navigate responsibility because there is no single conversation to join. Instead, they face a structural dilemma of irreconcilable responsibility demands.

It is within this context that we examined how the five largest Italian telecom companies communicated their CSR during the launch of 5G technologies. By analyzing their reports over a three-year period, we sought to uncover how managers actually deal with polarized responsibility demands, and what their choices reveal about the changing role and meaning of CSR in polarized times, as well as the potential long-term implications of them.

## DIALOGUE AS A BATTLEGROUND

Pure dialogue sounds good in theory, but rarely works that way in practice. While in theory it describes an enlightened and democratic exchange aimed at finding compromise among diverse interests and priorities, in practice it is rarely harmonious. CSR dialogue often involves power plays, rhetorical confrontation, and strategic persuasion rather than open deliberation.

CSR dialogues can be better understood as strategic arenas where companies and stakeholders compete to shape meanings and influence public understanding. As research shows (Scherer et al., 2013; Dawson & Brunner, 2020), these interactions bring together actors with contrasting moral claims, positions, and interpretations of what counts as responsible behavior, making dialogue less about consensus-building and more about negotiating and orienting moral authority.

But in polarized environments, this approach is impossible. Stakeholders do not simply have different priorities; they inhabit separate realities, grounded in incompatible assumptions about what is true and what is right (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). In the case of digitalization, one group

## HOW WE STUDIED IT

We examined how Italian telecom companies managed their CSR communication during the rollout of 5G. Specifically, we analyzed 18 CSR reports published between 2018 and 2021 by the five largest players in the market – TIM, Vodafone, WindTre, Fastweb, and Tiscali.

Through a thematic analysis, we explored how these companies framed 5G and digitalization, which stakeholders they engaged in their CSR activities, and how they positioned these initiatives within broader societal debates. To triangulate our data and enrich our findings, we conducted semi-structured interviews with CSR and communication managers from the same companies.

## A NOVEL APPROACH: PARTISAN CSR

Our analysis shows that telecom companies do not attempt to reconcile the two opposing views of digitalization. Instead, they practice what we call partisan CSR: engaging only with the favorable conversation and systematically ignoring the critical one.

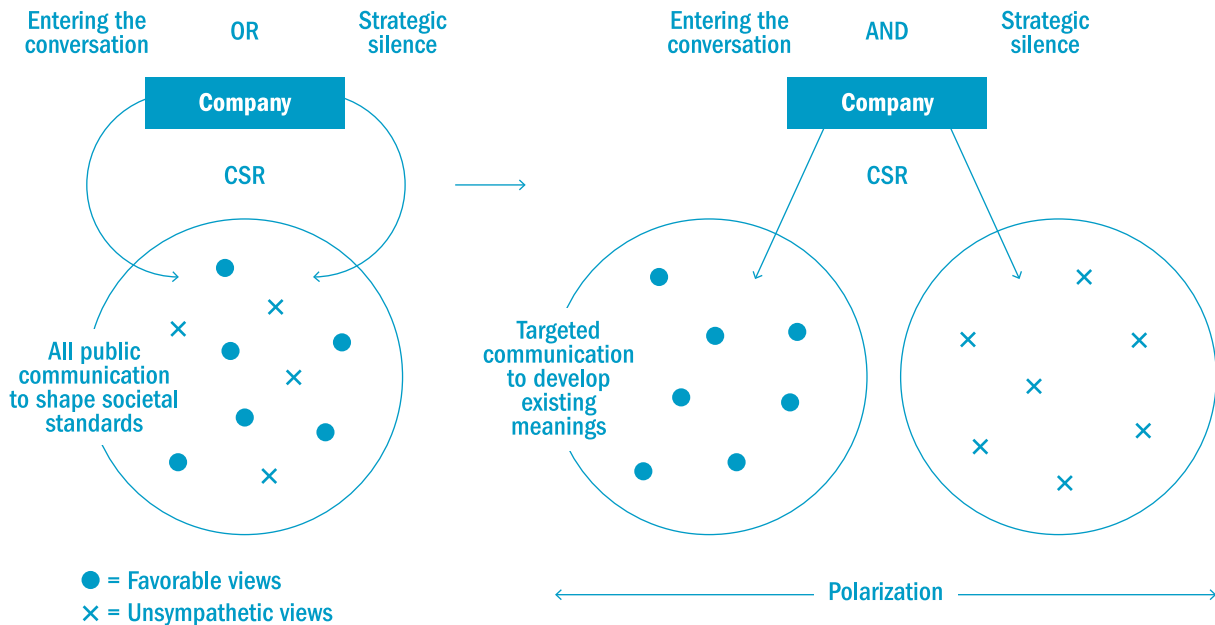
This approach unfolds in two steps:

- > **Framing digitalization as a legitimate CSR issue.** Telecoms elevate the need of digitalization to the same level as climate change or gender equality issues, often echoing the discourses of powerful institutions like the EU or the UN, for example by linking it to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. In this way, what is essentially their core business is reframed as a matter of responsibility.

- > **Capitalizing on this framing.** Once digitalization is established as a "responsible" cause, companies can:
  - > Present their everyday business – building networks, expanding 5G – as socially beneficial.
  - > Sidestep criticism about health risks by dismissing it as misinformation or marginal concern, without ever entering into direct debate.

Taken together, these moves show how partisan CSR works: Companies selectively amplify positive interpretations of their role while muting or delegitimizing negative ones. As a result, CSR shifts from balancing diverse societal expectations to crafting one-sided narratives that reinforce positive perceptions of responsibility in the eyes of key stakeholders.

## Changing the approach to CSR and CSR communication in polarized environments



Source: Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024

## What makes partisan CSR so tempting

Traditionally, managers facing polarizing issues have had two options for CSR communication:

- > **Dialogue:** Actively engage with all stakeholders, even

critics, in an effort to shape the conversation and win the moral struggle.

- > **Silence:** Stay out of controversial debates, reducing the risk of backlash when expectations are fragmented or unfavorable.

Partisan CSR blends these two alternative approaches, but in a highly selective way. Instead of trying to speak to everyone, companies focus on the audiences already inclined to see them as responsible. This approach allows them to:

- > Enter the favorable conversation to further reinforce the CSR narrative in a positive direction, strengthening the company's reputation as a responsible actor.
- > Stay silent in the hostile conversation, avoiding direct clashes with critical stakeholders and the reputational dangers of public confrontation.
- > Dismiss critical voices indirectly, not by debating them head-on, but by framing them as marginal, misinformed, or irrelevant to the broader discussion.

For managers, this approach can feel like a “best of both worlds” solution. On the one hand, it leverages the benefits of dialogue by shaping and amplifying supportive meanings. On the other, it enjoys the protective shield of silence, sidestepping the risks of engaging with deeply critical audiences. The result is a communication posture that looks proactive and values-driven, while in reality staying cautious and risk-averse.

Yet this comfort comes at a cost. By engaging only with supportive audiences, managers may gain short-term legitimacy, but they also risk reinforcing social divides and jeopardizing the very meaning of responsibility. In the long run, this has consequences not only for society, which becomes more fragmented, but also for business itself. When CSR loses its moral credibility, it stops generating genuine trust, which is the very foundation of long-term positive reputation and corporate success.

### How partisanship may jeopardize the very notion of CSR

Partisan CSR may look like a smart strategy: targeted, efficient, and low-risk. But beneath the surface, it carries profound implications for the role of business in society. Our analysis highlights two implications in particular.

**First, it fuels polarization.** One of the central promises of CSR has always been its bridging role: It creates a forum where companies listen to multiple stakeholders, negotiate shared understandings of responsibility, and

adapt their behavior accordingly. Implicit in this model is the idea that CSR communication addresses society as a whole. Partisan CSR breaks that assumption. When companies speak only to supportive audiences and ignore critical ones, CSR is no longer a collective dialogue. It becomes a selective tool to reinforce the views of those already on the company's side. The supportive conversation is amplified and institutionalized, while the opposing one is ignored or actively delegitimized. The result is sharper divides. Allies feel validated; critics feel excluded and alienated. Instead of building bridges, CSR risks becoming yet another driver of conflict, mistrust, and fragmentation in society.

**Second, it reshapes responsibility to fit business interests.** Traditionally, CSR has worked as society's corrective mechanism: Citizens set expectations – on issues such as sustainability, labor rights, and ethical sourcing – and companies adjust their practices to meet them. Responsibility, in this view, is defined by society and then integrated into business. In polarized contexts, however, companies may flip this logic. Rather than adapting their practices to external demands, they redefine responsibility in a way that matches what they already do. CSR becomes less about transforming the business, and more about reframing the business as inherently responsible. In the telecom case, digitalization was reframed as a societal need and hence elevated to the status of a CSR issue on par with environmental and inclusion issues and thus presented as a contribution to national development. This move is powerful: It turns core business into responsibility. But it also shifts the balance of CSR away from society's expectations and toward business-driven definitions. Over time, CSR risks becoming less about societal well-being and more about corporate self-justification.

Together, these two implications jeopardize the very essence of CSR. On the one hand, by engaging only with selected stakeholders, companies risk reducing CSR to what Barnett (2019) termed “critical stakeholder responsiveness”: responding to strategically relevant groups while disregarding society at large. On the other hand, by stretching the concept of responsibility to fit their business model, companies risk making CSR so malleable that almost any activity can be branded as “responsible”.

*Partisan CSR may transform responsibility from a bridge between business and society into a fault line that separates them.*

The growing tendency to instrumentalize corporate responsibility risks undermining both its ethical meaning and managerial value. When CSR becomes a vehicle for partisan positioning, it may offer short-term validation from supportive audiences but corrodes the trust on which sustainable legitimacy rests. In this sense, partisan CSR may transform responsibility from a bridge between business and society into a fault line that separates them.

## A CALL FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES

For managers, the central takeaway is that corporate responsibility loses its strategic value when it is reduced to a tool for image management. In polarized environments, the temptation to use CSR to strengthen the core business and mobilize supportive audiences is strong, yet such partisan strategies can backfire. What appears as reputational capital in the short term often becomes a source of distrust in the long run, eroding the credibility of both the company and the idea of responsibility itself.

Communication and sustainability leaders should therefore cultivate awareness of the different strategic options available when navigating contested issues: from partisan advocacy to dialogical engagement, selective silence, or participation in broader discursive struggles. Each of these choices entails distinct ethical and managerial implications. Understanding them helps organizations anticipate how different publics interpret their actions and how these interpretations affect trust, identification, and legitimacy over time.

From a practical perspective, this calls for embedding reflexivity into CSR decision-making: asking not only what to communicate, but why, to whom, and with what long-term effects. Building internal capacities for open dialogue and constructive dissent within the regular issue mapping and scenario analysis can help prevent responsibility from being instrumentalized for short-term advantage. It is in this spirit that we recently developed a stakeholder analytical framework that provides managers with practical guidance on how to embed reflexivity and dialogue into their CSR processes (see Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025).

## THE NARRATIVE-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STAKEHOLDERS

1. **Collect stakeholders' voices:** Gather data to capture diverse opinions and arguments about the issue. Explore different arenas (traditional and digital media) to identify key social actors who actively engage in discussions. Collect all texts authored by these stakeholders and, through a snowball approach, include other actors they mention.
2. **Identify the narratives:** Analyze the collected texts to detect the different narratives surrounding the issue and determine which one each stakeholder adopts. Identify three key elements in each narrative:
  - > How the issue is defined;
  - > The characters and their identities; and
  - > Their goals and intended actions.
3. **Derive insights from narratives:** Extract insights about stakeholders' perspectives from the narratives. Identify their underlying assumptions, sentiments, goals, and expectations toward others, as well as the relationship and alliances among them. Understanding stakeholders' perspectives helps managers characterize them more accurately, as it allows managers to move beyond biases that can arise from focusing only on the organization's own viewpoint.

Importantly, we need researchers to shed further light on the contextual and organizational factors that favor one approach over another and their respective outcomes for reputation, trust, and stakeholder relationships. Only by aligning moral intent with strategic awareness can managers safeguard both the meaning and the effectiveness of CSR.

## REFERENCES

**Barnett, M. L. (2019).** The business case for corporate social responsibility. *Business and society*, 58(1), 167-190. SAGE Publications.

**Colleoni, E. (2013).** CSR communication strategies for organizational legitimacy in social media. *Corporate Communications An International Journal*, 18(2), 228-248. Emerald.

**Gualtieri, G., & Lurati, F. (2024).** Being responsible in a polarized world: From dialogical to partisan CSR. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 38(4), 801-833.

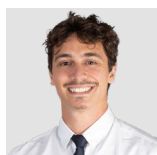
**Gualtieri, G., and Lurati, F. (2025).** Seeing through a polarized world: a narrative approach to understanding stakeholders. *Journal of Communication Management*, 29(2), pp.200-218.

**Knight, E., & Tsoukas, H. (2019).** When Fiction Trumps Truth: What 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' mean for management studies. *Organization studies*, 40(2), 183-197. SAGE Publications.

**Scherer, A. G., & Palazzo, G. (2011).** The new political role of business in a globalized world: A review of a new perspective on CSR and its implications for the firm, governance, and democracy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(4), 899-931. Wiley.

**Scherer, A. G., Palazzo, G., & Seidl, D. (2013).** Managing legitimacy in complex and heterogeneous environments: Sustainable development in a globalized world. *Journal of Management Studies*, 50(2), 259-284.

## AUTHORS



**DR. GASTONE GUALTIERI** is a postdoctoral researcher at the ZHAW School of Management and Law, Winterthur, Switzerland. Bridging management and communication, his research examines how disruptive societal conditions, such as scandals and polarization, shape the formation and management of CSR, reputation, and other social evaluations of organizations. Email: [guat@zhaw.ch](mailto:guat@zhaw.ch)



**DR. FRANCESCO LURATI** is a titular professor at the USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland. He pursues research in the field of corporate communication, in particular, in the areas of organizational identity, corporate reputation, and crisis communication. Email: [francesco.lurati@usi.ch](mailto:francesco.lurati@usi.ch)

## MORE INFORMATION

Additional details about the study and the framework are available in Gualtieri & Lurati, 2024 and Gualtieri & Lurati, 2025, as listed above.