

Corporations and Citizenship Arenas in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract Little attention has been paid to the importance of social media in the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature. This deficit is redressed in the present paper through utilizing the notion of ‘citizenship arenas’ to identify three dynamics in social media-augmented corporate–society relations. First, we note that social media-augmented ‘corporate arenas of citizenship’ are constructed by individual corporations in an effort to address CSR issues of specific importance thereto, and are populated by individual citizens as well as (functional/formally organized) stakeholders. Second, we highlight that, within social media-augmented ‘public arenas of citizenship’, individual citizens are empowered, relative to corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, when it comes to creating, debating, and publicizing, CSR-relevant issues. Third, we posit that information and communication technology corporations possess specific, and potentially very important, capacities, when it comes to creating, or helping construct, public arenas of citizenship from within which individual citizens can influence their broader political–economic environment. Following this, we discuss how social media can contribute to ‘dysfunctions’ as well as ‘progressions’ in corporate–society relations, and conclude with a number of suggestions for future research.

Keywords Corporate citizenship · Corporate social responsibility · Public sphere · Social media · Stakeholder

Introduction

The Internet and social media are increasingly recognized as important in the social sciences. Political and social theorists, for example, identify the changing dynamics the internet gives rise to for state–society relations (e.g., Castells 2000; Drezner 2010). Likewise, management and marketing scholars have begun analyzing the strategic risks and opportunities that social media raise for corporations (e.g., Jones et al. 2009); and corporate communications scholars the importance of social media for public relations and crisis management (e.g., Schultz et al. 2011). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) scholars, by way of contrast, are only just beginning to explore how social media impact on business responsibility in general, and on the nature of corporate–society relations in particular.

In addressing this lacuna, we here build upon a variety of works within the broader CSR literature (e.g., Logsdon and Wood 2002; Lozano 2005; Whelan 2013) to make a number of conceptual developments that we propose can help theorize these changing relations. In particular, we build on the notion of ‘citizenship arenas’ suggested by Crane et al. (2008), and propose that social media contribute to three dynamics in what we conceive as the ‘corporate arena of citizenship’ and the ‘public arena of citizenship’. In doing so, we question the tendency of extant CSR frameworks to privilege the importance of corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders over individual citizens. Further, and just as

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changing transnational political conditions are generally thought to have increased the importance of corporations and non-government organizations (NGOs) relative to states (e.g., Ruggie 2004), we propose, in a suitably qualified fashion, that changing information and communication technologies (ICTs) potentially increase the importance of individual citizens relative to corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders.

In making our contributions, we first draw on the political and social theory literatures to propose that, in comparison with old media (e.g., print, radio, and television), social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and related ICT developments (e.g., smart phones and the internet), offer faster communications, reduced entry costs, and multi-directional communications. Further, we refer to the management and marketing literatures to identify a number of strategic risks and opportunities that social media raise for corporations.

We then demonstrate that, despite social media's relevance to CSR issues, the CSR literature has not fully considered how social media change the dynamics of corporate–society relations. We contend that this omission relates to key contributions to the CSR literature emphasizing the importance of corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, and to their understating the importance of individual citizens and the general public. Thus, we build upon the notion of citizenship as individual political agency (e.g., Cohen 1999) and propose that the concept of 'citizenship arenas', which has recently been introduced to discussions of corporate citizenship (Crane et al. 2008, pp. 9–12), helps provide three insights into corporate–society dynamics in the age of social media.

First, we conceive of 'corporate arenas of citizenship' as being constructed by specific corporations in an effort to address their respective CSR issues, and as being participated in by (functional/formally organized) stakeholders and individual citizens. More specifically, we contend that whereas more traditional corporate arenas of citizenship tend to exclude interested individual citizens by virtue of their temporal and physical limitations, social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship are relatively more inclusive and popular due to their being digitally accessible.

Second, we conceive of social media-augmented 'public arenas of citizenship' as being constructed by corporations that *own* and/or *control* social media technologies (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), and as being participated in by other corporations, (functional/formally organized) stakeholders and individual citizens. In addition to CSR issues (e.g., bribery and human rights), public arenas of citizenship are populated by broad public interests (e.g., sport, gossip, and current affairs). Further, and whereas corporations and NGOs enjoy a privileged position within old

media-enabled public arenas of citizenship (see Baron 2005, more generally), we suggest that this privilege is diminished relative to individual citizens within social media-augmented public arenas of citizenship.

Third, we posit that ICT corporations possess potentially very important capacities when it comes to constructing public arenas of citizenship. We develop this argument by building on (a) the recognition that corporate influence on global and/or national political–economic environments is a CSR issue (e.g., Whelan 2012); and (b) the suggestion that "social connection" (Young 2006, pp. 119–125) and/or "co-responsibility" (Lozano 2005, p. 68) networks can help provide various public goods. Accordingly, we propose that key CSR issues for ICT corporations include the roles they play in enabling the voice and organizing capacities of individual citizens in relation to their broader political–economic environment (Schmidt and Cohen 2010). This is an ICT sector application of the adage that 'CSR is no longer about what is done with the profits, but about how they are made'.

On the basis of these three conceptual advances, we then observe that, notwithstanding social media's potential contribution to 'progressive' corporate–society relations, they can also contribute to corporate–society 'dysfunctions'. Further, we note that these dysfunctions can be both diminished and exacerbated by the activities of states and individual citizens (acting independently or collectively). In concluding, we identify a number of ways in which our conceptual contributions can contribute to future research.

Social Media and Social Relations

The term 'social media' refers to the overlapping communication platforms that rapidly developing ICTs (e.g., the internet and 'smart' phones) have enabled since the turn of the century. In particular, we use the term 'social media' to refer to social networking sites such as Facebook (1 billion active monthly users, Pring 2012); microblogs such as Twitter (~288 million users, Pring 2012); blogs such as 'order-order' by the British political commentator 'Guido Fawkes', of which there are now more than 152 million (Pring 2012); content sharing sites such as YouTube (~1 billion active monthly users, Elliott 2011); and wikis such as the open-source encyclopaedia Wikipedia and the whistle blowing site WikiLeaks.

As with previous ICT developments (e.g., the printing press), it is often suggested that social media can revolutionize social relations (Schmidt and Cohen 2010). Whilst this revolutionary potential is questioned (e.g., Habermas 2009, pp. 157–158), it is generally thought that the multi-modal and transnational nature of social media foster the autonomy of civil society (Castells 2007); and qualitatively

alter, if not diminish, state control of communications and media (Drezner 2010; Goldsmith and Wu 2006). It has been argued, for example, that social media technologies enabled women (and men) in Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia to question gender and relationship norms (Cohen 2007, p. 135, 241). More famously, social media have enabled WikiLeaks to publish top secret documents on the actions of the United States government and various corporations: e.g., Pfizer's attempted blackmailing of the Nigerian Attorney-General (Zifcak 2012, p. 141).

The manner in which social media open up these new spaces for social interaction (e.g., Drezner 2010, p. 31; Papacharissi 2010, p. 15) relates to at least three overlapping considerations. First, it relates to social media increasing the speed by which citizens can communicate, share information, and organize (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006). During the London riots of 2011, for example, rioters planned events 'on the hoof' through social networking and microblogging, and often managed to keep one step ahead of the police through non-traceable instant messaging services (Halliday 2011). More whimsically, various social media were used by individuals to rapidly distribute horse meat jokes and threaten/organize consumer boycotts following revelations that horse meat was found in 'beef' burgers sold by prominent UK retailers (King and Buckley 2013).

Second, the relatively low costs associated with social media enable increasing levels of networked and peer-to-peer communications (e.g., Castells 2000; Juris 2005). Thus, social media enable people to be increasingly involved in (transnational) communities that (co-)create, modify, and share, information (e.g., Kietzmann et al. 2011). Further, the reduced costs associated with social media networks enable a variety of new broadcasters and/or narrowcasters to emerge (Bennett 2003). The animal rights NGO 'People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' (PETA) for example, use PETA TV to stream controversial advertisements banned by mainstream broadcasters (<http://www.petatv.com>). In doing so, PETA, which has more than 300,000 followers on Twitter and more than 1.5 million 'likes' on Facebook at the time of writing, has been able to directly target the CSR credentials of fast food retailers that are (indirectly) involved in animal slaughter (e.g., KFC and McDonalds).

Third, social media are networked and multi-directional. Unlike old media, which are relatively hierarchical and unidirectional in that messages are sent from a sender (e.g., a broadcaster; a newspaper; and a radio station) to a receiver (e.g., a viewer; a reader; and a listener), social media enable politically motivated individuals and organizations to create and respond to messages in new ways. In 2006 for instance, Unilever commissioned an 'Evolution Real Beauty' campaign for its Dove range of beauty

products. The campaign included YouTube clips highlighting the purportedly artificial and unattainable goals of the modelling and beauty industries in general. The campaign went 'viral' (i.e., was spread through pre-existing networks via social media) with the YouTube clips being watched more than 10 million times. The success of the Dove campaign, however, was partially moderated by the numerous YouTube spoof critiques that also went viral, and that were themselves watched on more than a million occasions. Interestingly, these critiques, which highlighted the purportedly damaging stereotypes perpetuated by various Dove products, were often constructed by individuals (as opposed to NGOs).

In supplementing the work of political and social theorists (e.g., Goldsmith and Wu 2006), management and marketing theorists have highlighted the strategic threats and opportunities that social media raise for corporations. To begin with the opportunities, it has been argued that social media enable corporations to better manage their reputation (Jones et al. 2009, p. 930); better monitor their external environment (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith 2008, p. 143); and better understand/engage with stakeholders (e.g., Waters et al. 2009). In addition, it has been suggested that corporations (and their supporters) can use social media to improve the management of corporate crises (e.g., Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith 2008; Schultz et al. 2011). Thus, Primark used social media to address allegations of human rights abuse in their supply chain which had been broadcast by the BBC, and various supporters of Primark (and their cheap clothing products) used social media to voice their support for the brand (Jones et al. 2009).

Social media also bring risks for corporations. In particular, when corporations make mistakes online (e.g., if they respond badly to a blog posting), their responses cannot be hidden away because the online environment forms a digital panopticon in which the past is forever present (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). Furthermore, and as the spoof Dove campaigns outlined above suggest, the emergence of social media has made it easier for concerned citizens to 'hijack' or 'bust' brands online. Thus, it appears that some reputational risks are increased by social media (e.g., Gorry and Westbrook 2009).

CSR and Citizenship

We propose that the decentralizing and interactive possibilities of social media are potentially significant for CSR. In the process of further exploring their significance, we use the present section to identify three key features of the broader CSR literature, which contextualize the conceptual contributions we subsequently make with the remainder of the paper.

First, we note that whilst the CSR literature is relatively diverse, there are some common themes. Most notably, the CSR literature is broadly concerned with conceiving, explaining, and/or prescribing, business and society interactions, and with understanding the impact corporate policies and practices have upon social goods (e.g., Gond and Moon 2011, pp. 16–21). Accordingly, we conceive of the CSR literature as encompassing various business–society perspectives: e.g., corporate citizenship, corporate social performance, stakeholder theory.

Second, we observe that the CSR literature tends towards corporate-centrism. For example, Bowen (1953, p. 6) refers to the “obligations of businessmen (sic)”; Davis (1960, p. 70) to “businessmen’s (sic) decisions and actions”; McGuire (1963, p. 144) to the “corporation’s responsibilities”; and Frederick (1994, p. 247) to “the capacity of a corporation to respond to social pressure”. Further, we note that in stakeholder models, the corporation is often figuratively placed at the centre (e.g., Donaldson and Preston 1995).

Third, much of the CSR literature is stakeholder-centric. This stakeholder-centrism is evidenced by the considerable influence that Freeman’s (1984) seminal work on stakeholder theory continues to exert within CSR scholarship (e.g., Basu and Palazzo 2008; Carroll 1999; Epstein 1987; Maignan and Ferrell 2000). Moreover, it is evidenced by the manner in which influential stakeholder writings commonly emphasize the importance of *functional and/or formally organized* stakeholders (e.g., Donaldson and Preston 1995; Mitchell et al. 1997). Indeed, even writings that seek to differentiate themselves from stakeholder theory, commonly share much in common with it. Whelan (2012, p. 720), for example, highlights that key aspects of the overlapping ‘political’ CSR (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo 2011) and corporate citizenship literatures (e.g., Crane et al. 2008, p. 96) amount to a fairly simple extension of stakeholder theory in that they add formally organized NGOs to the functional/formally organized stakeholders that are more generally recognized.

As these remarks begin to indicate, and in duly noting that stakeholders have been capaciously defined as “any identifiable group or individual who can affect [or be affected by] the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman and Reed 1983, p. 91), we suggest that many CSR theories are stakeholder-centric because they focus on stakeholders that fall within one or more of the following three groups. First, CSR theories commonly highlight the importance of ‘functional’ stakeholders who play a key role with regard to corporate inputs and outputs. These stakeholders include consumers, employees, shareholders and suppliers, and are often conceived as being in a ‘win-win’ relationship with corporations and corporate management (e.g., Phillips 1997, p. 63). Second, CSR

theories tend to emphasize the importance of ‘formally organized’ stakeholders. These stakeholders, who do not play a functional role in corporate affairs, and who include NGOs concerned with such matters as sustainable development and human rights (Whelan 2012, p. 720), can impact upon corporate activities through their advocacy and agitation. Third, CSR theories tend to also identify “members of the local community” (e.g., Evan and Freeman 1988, p. 104) and indigenous peoples groups (e.g., Crane et al. 2008, Chap. 6; Scherer and Palazzo 2007, p. 1110) as important corporate stakeholders.

For the reasons just outlined, we consider the general CSR literature to be both corporate- and stakeholder-centric. In contrast, we think that the more specific literature on corporate citizenship points towards the possibility of individual citizens being brought to the fore. Crane et al. (2008, pp. 9–12), for example, do this when they write of “citizenship arenas”, and Logsdon and Wood (2002, p. 169) do likewise in using “business citizenship” to argue that corporations have a duty to be concerned with the human rights of “voiceless people” worldwide.

Given that we build on these interpretations of corporate–citizenship relations, and given the significant size of the citizenship literature, it is important that we clarify how we here conceive (and utilize) citizenship. Most generally, we use citizenship to emphasize the manner in which human individuals *participate* in public activities that are designed to influence other (human or organizational) political–economic actors, and/or, the political–economic institutions that surround them. For present purposes, then, we do not engage with conceptions of citizenship based on ‘status’ or ‘entitlements’ (e.g., Marshall 1965), and/or, that emphasize civil, political and social rights (e.g., Kymlicka and Norman 1994, pp. 354–355).

In emphasizing the participatory aspect of citizenship, we are agnostic as to the various objectives that are commonly attached thereto. Thus, we do not distinguish between such ideals as the civic republican, the virtuous liberal, or the deliberative democrat. Rather, we simply note that all these perspectives acknowledge that individual citizens should and can actively seek to shape, or participate within, the political–economic environments that surround them (e.g., Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Moon et al. 2005). Similarly, we do not side with more cosmopolitan or more national notions of citizenship (e.g., Archibugi 2003). Instead, we choose to emphasize that citizens can seek to influence political–economic actors and institutions within and beyond national borders. Further, we emphasize that key features of social media (e.g., Bennett 2003; Juris 2005) enable individuals to more easily form and participate within transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998), and/or, to engage with geographically diffuse national populations.

This broad participative perspective of citizenship is particularly relevant to theoretical analyses of CSR and social media because (relative to corporations and stakeholders) individual citizens tend to be enabled by social media; and because (relative to old media) social media diminishes various costs associated with individuals communicating and organizing. Accordingly, and whilst social media may not provide individual citizens with more ‘exit’ opportunities vis-à-vis corporations, we suggest they do potentially provide them with more opportunities to express their ‘voice’ (more generally, see Hirschman 1970) and organize. Indeed, the increased speed, the reduced costs, and the multi-directional nature of social media, means that individual citizens can, along with corporations and (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, communicate and organize with other individual citizens (and corporations and stakeholders) in ways that were hitherto not possible. In further exploring and explaining the importance of these developments for CSR, we now outline three changing dynamics that occur within corporate and public arenas of citizenship.

Corporate Arenas of Citizenship and Social Media

It has been recognized that corporations can construct public spheres (Habermas 1989) within which different actors can agree and disagree over various CSR issues of specific relevance to the corporation that constructs them (Whelan 2013). Accordingly, we use the concept of ‘corporate arenas of citizenship’ to emphasize the manner in which specific corporations can construct spaces within which individual citizens (and/or less formally organized social movement actors) can—along with (functional/formally organized) stakeholders—discuss, debate, and organize, CSR issues of specific relevance to their corporate creator.

Corporate arenas of citizenship are, of course, a well-established phenomenon. Energy and mining corporations, for example, commonly organize ‘town hall’ meetings where individual citizens and (functional/formally organized) stakeholders are free to come ask questions about corporate policies at a specific time and place (e.g., Kemp 2010; Wei-Skillern 2004). Such ‘physical’ corporate arenas of citizenship, however, are fairly limited in terms of the number of individual citizens who can participate: for their location and timing will often preclude the involvement of many potentially interested citizens. Whilst these constraints also apply to (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, such stakeholders are generally more capable of overcoming them: for unlike individual citizens, they can often dispatch staff whose job involves attending such events.

Although social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship are not entirely free of temporal and locational constraints, they are diminished within them. Indeed, in being digitally accessible to interested citizens with the required technologies, social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship can be considered relatively popular and inclusive. E.ON UK, for example, a fully-owned subsidiary of the German energy giant E.ON, has created a ‘Talking Energy’ YouTube channel on which it posts videos on its CSR policies and practices, and which also allows individual citizens and (functional/formally organized) stakeholders to post videos. Interestingly, E.ON has employed a fairly relaxed approach to video moderation, allowing various individual citizens, and activists from horizontally organized and amorphous social movement ‘groups’ within the UK (e.g., Climate Camp, Climate Rush, and Plane Stupid), to post hyper-critical commentaries on CSR policies relating to climate change, energy security and fuel poverty.

In recognizing that corporations can now construct social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship, we do not suggest that they no longer utilize their physical counterpart. Nor do we suggest that (functional/formally organized) stakeholders are no longer important. Thus, whilst maintaining its ‘Talking Energy’ YouTube channel, E.ON UK has frequently organized physical corporate arenas of citizenship whilst planning projects in the UK. For example, it held five public consultations in July 2012 as part of its application for one onshore wind farm in County Durham. Further, it continues to engage with formally organized stakeholders such as Age UK on issues such as reducing the energy costs of low income pensioners (see E.ON UK); and remains keenly aware that it is a target of formally organized environmental NGOs like Greenpeace.

Another example of a social media-augmented corporate arena of citizenship is the ‘BP Energy Lab’. This initiative invites participants to join BP in tackling the challenges of saving energy and making the environment cleaner through adopting eco-friendly behaviour. BP has used this arena to generate ‘Tips to Living Greener’ by encouraging individual citizens to contribute their ‘real tips’, to ‘tweet your tip’, and to ‘share this site and get friends involved’ (BP). Further, BP has used its YouTube channel to convey information on such issues as its posited commitment to making reparations following the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil disaster. Individual citizens have been free to post responses to BP’s communications. FChrisW443, for example, suggested that, rather than being committed to such reparations, BP should commit to “not aggressively destroying the planet[’s] environment for huge amounts of money”, and that their ‘commitment’ was a “[n]ice propaganda ad... [that was] really well made... with that dirty

money. Get it? Dirty money? LOL”. More succinctly, Kemonokami commented “Deepwater Horizon: Never forgiven. Never forgotten” (BPb).

Like E.ON, BP’s social media-augmented corporate arena of citizenship continues alongside more traditional means of engaging stakeholders. Thus, BP notes that its ‘community investment’ involves ‘continuous and open dialogue’, and that it is involved in ‘information sharing’ with relevant communities: e.g., Turkish villages impacted by the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline (BPc). Further, BP continues to engage with (functional/formally organized) stakeholders: e.g., to elicit the opinions of such formally organized stakeholders as Transparency International and Forum for the Future (BPd).

In providing these various illustrations, we acknowledge that social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship do not lead to some sort of complete transformation in corporate–society relations. In particular, we recognize that their corporate constructors need not be more (or less) likely to change their substantive CSR practices. Nevertheless, we argue that the emergence of social media-augmented corporate arenas of citizenship does lead to a relative increase in the ability of individual citizens to voice their point of view on CSR issues. Further, we contend that the corporate- and stakeholder-centric nature of extant CSR theorizing should be amended to acknowledge that social media enable wider citizenship participation in discussions of corporate-specific CSR issues.

Public Arenas of Citizenship and Social Media

We have just suggested that social media enable corporations to construct corporate arenas of citizenship wherein individual citizens can engage corporations on CSR issues that are specific to the corporate constructor, and that are largely defined and delineated thereby. In the present section, we suggest that social media also enable individual citizens to influence CSR issues within what we term ‘public arenas of citizenship’. Unlike their corporate arena counterparts, public arenas of citizenship are populated by a much wider set of social concerns and interests (e.g., gossip, sport, and current affairs). Nevertheless, they are also populated by CSR issues of a more or less general nature (which may or may not be simultaneously found within corporate arenas of citizenship): e.g., debates over Nike’s sustainability policies, discussions of fast fashion supply chains, analyses of the merits of shareholder versus stakeholder governance.

We situate the general use citizens can make of platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr under the umbrella of social media-augmented public arenas of citizenship. Given that all these platforms are owned and/or

controlled by businesses, we emphasize that the reason for them being conceived as public arenas of citizenship (and not corporate arenas of citizenship) is because of the huge variety of social interests and debates they contain. Unlike E.ON’s own YouTube channel, which only contains videos that directly relate to E.ON’s CSR concerns, YouTube more generally contains a host of other channels (e.g., the National Basketball Association’s channel), and a huge number of ‘standalone’ videos of various things (e.g., cute kittens, people hurting themselves, and music festivals). In addition, it contains video footage relevant to CSR in general: e.g., of sweatshops in China; of Ed Freeman discussing stakeholder theory; and of animals being mistreated within the supply chains of high street retailers.

Just as the idea of corporate arenas of citizenship has affinities with the idea of corporate-constructed public spheres (Whelan 2013), our conception of public arenas of citizenship shares much with Habermas’s original and more capacious conception of public spheres (1989). But whilst Habermas (2009, pp. 157–158) and various others (e.g., Dahlberg 2005) are sceptical as to the democratic merits of digital technologies, we suggest that social media-augmented public arenas of citizenship are potentially more democratic than their old media counterparts.

One reason is that corporations and formally organized NGOs are in a strong position from which to directly and indirectly influence the reporting of CSR issues within old media-enabled public arenas of citizenship (e.g., newspapers) (see Baron 2005). This influence relates to the often significant advertorial (e.g., Livesey 2002) and advertising (Staats 2004, pp. 590–591) budgets that corporations control in particular. The influence of individual citizens, on the other hand, has tended to be quite limited within old media-enabled public arenas of citizenship. Within newspapers for instance, individual citizens have only really been able to contribute to CSR debates through their ‘letters to the editor’ section, and, much less directly, as consumers who collectively decide a newspaper’s success or failure.

Within social media-enabled public arenas of citizenship this imbalance is partially redressed (e.g., Papacharissi 2010, p. 158). This is because the time and financial costs of producing and disseminating information with social media is significantly reduced. As a result, the ‘playing field’ of social media-enabled public arenas of citizenship is potentially levelled in a fashion that *relatively* enables individual citizens. Three examples illustrate the importance of this levelling for CSR practice and scholarship.

The first example involves Starbucks’ presence in China’s Forbidden City, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. In January 2007, a Chinese citizen and media personality, Rui Chenggang, suggested that Starbucks’ presence “undermined the Forbidden City’s solemnity and

trampled over Chinese culture” (Han and Zhang 2009, p. 396). Having previously failed in his attempts at using old media to generate interest in his campaign, Rui used his blog (Chiu et al. 2011; Han and Zhang 2009) to encourage others to debate the appropriateness of Starbucks’ Forbidden City presence (Han and Zhang 2009). Rui’s revised tactics led to an anti-Starbucks online petition gathering 500,000 signatures (BBC 2007), and to his blog postings gaining significant attention within the Chinese and international old media (Han and Zhang 2009; Watts 2007, p. 1). His efforts also preceded a call in China’s National People’s Congress for Starbucks to close its Forbidden City outlet (NYT 2007). The Palace Museum, which runs the Forbidden City, subsequently ordered Starbucks to relinquish its own identity, join with other beverage vendors, and collectively sell under the Forbidden City brand (Han and Zhang 2009, p. 399). Although Starbucks initially attempted to ward off this social media-enabled ‘solemnity’ crisis (Chiu et al. 2011; Dickie 2007), it quickly decided to close its Forbidden City outlet in July 2007, about 6 months after Rui’s social media campaign began.

Our second example concerns the retail fashion brand, Mango, which launched a line of ‘slave jewellery’ on its website. Individual citizens initiated a ‘Twitter shower’ against Mango to highlight their disapproval and called for consumers to boycott the fashion chain (Keeley 2013). Two celebrities also organized an online petition that accused Mango of trivializing slavery (which continues to affect many lives), and demanded a public apology and withdrawal of the jewellery. The petition collected over 7,000 signatures (Taylor 2013). Although the jewellery remains on sale, Mango has used Twitter to apologize to users and advise them that a translation error was behind the naming of the jewellery range, which has since been simply re-labelled as a line of necklaces (Whitelocks 2013).

Our final example involves the retail stationer Paperchase, which was accused of plagiarizing from a little known artist when copies of her work appeared on their products (Hough 2010). The artist used her blog to complain about the retailer’s alleged theft after it ignored her previous attempts to resolve the issue through more conventional means (Hough 2010). The online complaint was picked up on Twitter and caused “thousands of Twitter users” to join in, leading to the artist’s grievance becoming one of the top Twitter stories in the UK and globally within hours (Topping 2010). The company also received hundreds of complaints (Hough 2010). Within a week of the Twitter storm, Paperchase admitted it had inadvertently used the artist’s designs, after initially denying the allegations, and apologized (Stabe 2010).

As these examples highlight, social media enable (both famous and not so famous) individual citizens to influence

corporate CSR agendas through creating *and* disseminating media content within public arenas of citizenship. Furthermore, two of the examples (Starbucks and Paperchase) highlight that some individual citizens have enjoyed more success when they voice their concerns within social media-enabled than old media-enabled arenas. Accordingly, and whilst corporations, their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, and other organized actors more generally (e.g., states, religious organizations, trade unions, and associations), continue to control significant resources that enable them to play important online roles, we suggest that social media-enabled public arenas of citizenship potentially lead to a relative increase in the participatory capacities of individual citizens.

ICT Companies in Public Arenas of Citizenship

In the two preceding sections, we proposed that, relative to corporations and (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, individual citizens are increasingly able to act within social media-augmented corporate- and public-arenas of citizenship. Nevertheless, we have also noted that the communication platforms and ICTs (e.g., the internet and ‘smart’ phones) that enable social media are commonly owned and/or controlled by large corporations (e.g., Apple, Google, Microsoft, and Amazon). Accordingly, we now suggest that ICT corporations enjoy a privileged position from which to promote the voice and organizing opportunities that individual citizens possess within their broader political–economic environment (cf. Crane et al. 2008, p. 139, 147).

There are two reasons for considering this issue of specific relevance to CSR (and not just governance more generally). First, it is increasingly acknowledged that the corporate ability to construct or influence global and national political–economic environments is a CSR issue (e.g., Moon et al. 2011; Scherer and Palazzo 2011; Whelan 2012). Thus, CSR activities are now commonly thought to encompass such things as corporate participation in multi-stakeholder initiatives (Rasche 2012); corporate provision of economic and social goods (Matten and Crane 2005; Crane et al. 2008, Chap. 3); and the corporate capacity to influence autocratic regimes (Wettstein 2012, pp. 756–757).

Second, the realization of many political–economic goods and entitlements requires that “social connection” (Young 2006, pp. 119–125) and/or “co-responsibility” (Lozano 2005, p. 68) networks be utilized. For example, it is currently suggested that corporations, corporate subcontractors, states, and NGOs, all need to engage in new activities, and to interrelate in new ways, if multinational corporations are to increasingly “respect” human rights

(Ruggie 2011). In addition, and just as various organizational actors (e.g., corporations and NGOs) are commonly considered part of the networks that can help rectify a purported social good concern, so too are those individual citizens who immediately suffer from them (Young 2006, pp. 123–124).

In light of these two observations, we highlight the manner in which ICT corporations can contribute to the voice opportunities and organizing capacities that can better enable individual citizens to influence their political–economic environments. Schmidt and Cohen (2010, p. 78), for example, the Executive Chair of Google and Director of Google Ideas, respectively, have acknowledged this possibility:

“The combination of... new technologies and the desire for greater freedom is already changing politics in some of the world’s most unlikely places. In Colombia in 2008, an unemployed engineer named Oscar Morales used Facebook and the free Internet-based telephone service Skype to orchestrate a massive demonstration against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. He was able to muster the largest protest against a terrorist group in history and the sort of high-profile blow to militants that no Colombian president has been able to achieve in the past 40 years. In Moldova in 2009, young people, frustrated and angry over a collapsing economy and fraying society, gathered in the streets of Chisinau after a rigged election. They used messages on Twitter to turn a small protest of 15,000 people into a global event. As international and internal pressure continued to rise, the rigged election was overturned, and a new election brought to power the first non-communist government in Moldova in more than 50 years. And in Iran last year... citizens [employed social media] to spread information that directly challenged the results of the country’s flawed presidential election.”

Whilst Schmidt and Cohen arguably overstate social media’s revolutionary potential (Drezner 2010; Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Morozov 2011), they demonstrate that ICT companies own and control “inherently political” technologies that can enable “individuals to consume, distribute, and create their own content without government control” (Schmidt and Cohen 2010, p. 84, 78).

Various governments have recognized this power. Perhaps most notably, the US State Department uses the idea of ‘21st Century Statecraft’ to suggest that digital networks enable people within non-democratic regimes to communicate and organize in what amounts to an increasingly democratic fashion (USDOS). Furthermore, former US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, suggested that,

“Increasingly, U.S. companies are making the issue of internet and information freedom a greater consideration in their business decisions”, and that she “hope[d] that their competitors and foreign governments will pay close attention to this trend” (Clinton 2010).

Likewise, numerous NGOs are currently pressuring ICT corporations to ensure that the technologies they control promote, rather than undermine, human rights. NGOs such as Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Human Rights Watch, for example, have joined companies (e.g., Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo!), investors, and academics, in the ICT multi-stakeholder initiative the Global Network Initiative (GNI): which is concerned to “protect and advance freedom of expression and privacy in the” information and communication technologies sector (GNI).

Clearly, states, and (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, remain of key importance for understanding CSR in the age of social media. Principally, this is because they often believe that the technologies ICT corporations control can enable individual citizens to further their own political–economic objectives worldwide. The EFF, for example, suggests that, from “the Internet to the iPod, technologies are transforming our society and empowering us as... citizens” (EFF). More broadly, the US State Department suggests that:

“Open information networks have altered power dynamics around the world and forced governments to respond. Broadly speaking, we have seen a decentralization of power away from government and large institutions and toward networks of people... [that]... makes it much more difficult to maintain a large gap between the aspirations of the governed and the actions of the governing”, (USDOS).

Accordingly, we consider the manner in which ICT corporations do, or do not, alter, the power dynamics between individual citizens and their broader political–economic environment, a key CSR issue. Given the ongoing financial crisis, a similar point has recently been made as to the maintenance of a functioning financial system and banking CSR (Herzig and Moon 2013).

Social Media and Societal Dysfunctions

In making our three conceptual advances above, we have focused on the ‘progressive’ potential of social media-augmented corporate- and public-arenas of citizenship. We have shown how social media can empower individual citizens, and can help to further democratize the debating, and organizing, of, CSR and related public good issues. This progressive potential, however, should not be viewed

uncritically. Accordingly, we propose that social media can also contribute to four types of corporate–society ‘dys-function’: fragmentation of citizenship arenas; centralization of ICT power; irresponsible uses of social media; and the vulnerability of social media to criminality.

First, whilst social media democratize social relations by decreasing some of the costs individual citizens face when it comes to expressing their voice and getting organized; they also contribute to increasingly fragmented corporate and public-arenas of citizenship for much the same reason (e.g., Habermas 2009, pp. 157–158). Digital itinerants who are more interested in ‘trolling’ (i.e., provoking a reaction) than they are in specific CSR or public good concerns, for example, have the ability to ‘side-track’ corporations (and the public more generally) with marginal, fleeting, often unsubstantiated, issues. In these cases, social media-augmented arenas of citizenship might be considered more dysfunctional than their old media counterparts.

Second, although social media arguably contribute to the “decentralization of power away from government and large institutions and toward networks of people” (US-DOS), they also contribute to power being centralized in the hands of those who own and/or control them. Facebook, for instance, constructs and maintains privacy settings that impact upon the (online) lives of, and that appear to be an increasing source of confusion for, their users worldwide (Cranor 2013). Furthermore, ICT corporations are commonly asked to provide ‘private’ information on individual citizens to governments around the world (Google). The ethical concerns this raises for many (e.g., EFF) are encapsulated by the case of Shi Tao, who, in April 2005, was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for using his Yahoo! email account to disclose Chinese “‘state secrets’ overseas”. Part of the prosecution’s evidence included “account-holder information” that Yahoo! had provided the Chinese authorities with (Lawrence 2009, p. 262).

Third, we note that social media and associated technologies can enable cyberterrorism. In the middle of August 2012, for example, and following on from a series of violent and deadly clashes “between indigenous people in the [Indian] northeastern state of Assam and Muslim settlers from neighbouring Bangladesh” (Arakali 2012), social media was reportedly used by Muslim terrorist groups from Pakistan and Bangladesh to spread fear amongst, and thereby incite, northeast Indian migrant workers (Radin 2012). Such fear-mongering is a far cry from the sorts of ‘progressive’ outcomes that cyber-libertarians commonly expected, or at least hoped for, back in the 1990s (see Goldsmith and Wu 2006, Chap. 2). So too is the fact that social media accounts can be hacked with the use of open-source software (or the ‘physical’ accessing of people’s logins and passwords). Indeed, there are grounds

for fearing that the efforts of hackers, trolls, and so on, can result in the (on- and off-line) lives of individual citizens being harmed in significant ways (e.g., Honan 2012).

Finally, social media platforms are themselves vulnerable to criminal and terrorist attacks. ‘Botnets’, for example, are networks of compromised computers which can be remotely controlled through the Internet, and which can be used to block internet traffic to specific sites through distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, to spread spam, and so on (Wilson 2008, pp. 5–6). They were recently used against the social media platform Wordpress, “which has around 64 million individual blogs and websites,” and which has been ranked as the 21st most visited site in the world (Whittaker 2013). This attack is particularly noteworthy because it appears it was designed to create a future botnet that controls some of the servers on which Wordpress blogs are situated. Anyone capable of creating a botnet with these servers would be in a position to “launch DDoS attacks that are far stronger than what we typically see” (Wheatley 2013). Furthermore, they would make social media platforms a significant (and unwitting) contributor to criminality and terrorism.

As with the products of various other corporations then (e.g., banks and arms manufacturers), we emphasize that the products of ICT corporations can be used for irresponsible, criminal and hateful ends by various actors (e.g., other corporations, individual citizens, and terrorists). For better or worse, the use that is made of such technologies will always be at least partly beyond the control of ICT corporations. Nevertheless, ICT corporations clearly possess significant discretion when it comes to managing their responsibilities in the age of social media.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that social media contribute to recent changes in corporate–society relations, and have argued that the corporate- and stakeholder-centric frameworks associated with the broad CSR literature are insufficient to account for these changes. More positively, we have built upon notions of corporate citizenship (Crane et al. 2008; Logsdon and Wood 2002), political CSR (e.g., Whelan 2012), and stakeholder co-responsibility (Lozano 2005), to argue that:

- (i) social media contribute to significant changes within corporate arenas of citizenship;
- (ii) social media contribute to significant changes within public arenas of citizenship; and that
- (iii) ICT corporations possess significant capacities with which to enable individual citizens to participate within public arenas of citizenship.

In making these three conceptual advances, we have argued that, as individual citizens, and the general publics they combine to form, are relatively and potentially empowered by the emergence of social media; so too is the power of corporations, and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, relatively and potentially tempered. Accordingly, our argument is not that social media make citizens, individually and/or collectively, more powerful than corporations and their stakeholders. Rather, it is that citizens are *potentially* enabled *relative* to corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders.

To be clear as to the nature of our argument, we once again emphasize the reasoning behind our demarcations and labelling. In particular, we distinguish between (functional/formally organized) stakeholders and citizens because we wish to highlight the ways in which individuals—as citizens; and not just as consumers, employees, suppliers, or NGO members—can themselves contribute to debates, and organize around, CSR and public good issues. Furthermore, and given that ‘unaligned’ individuals have been conceived as stakeholders (Freeman and Reed 1983, p. 91), we emphasize that we here prefer the idea of citizenship given the full spectrum of individual political capacities it helps reveal, and because these capacities are not, as stakeholder models tend to figuratively suggest, simply directed at corporations (e.g., Donaldson and Preston 1995).

In positing that social media enable individual citizens *relative* to corporations and their (functional/formally organized) stakeholders, we recognize that a similar argument might be made vis-à-vis stakeholders and corporations. The reason why is that, like individual citizens, (formally/functionally organized) stakeholders can more easily debate and organize around CSR and public good issues as a result of social media. Nevertheless, we here concentrate upon individual citizens because we believe it is they who enjoy the relatively greatest increase in participatory opportunities. Formally organized NGOs, for example, have long enjoyed a ‘news generating’ position within old media-enabled arenas of citizenship (Baron 2005) that is supplemented, rather than massively expanded, by the emergence of social media. Furthermore, we highlight that the sheer number of individual citizens who benefit from the reduced costs that social media gives rise to, means that it is they who enjoy the relatively greatest increase in participative capacities.

We also stress that this relative increase in participative opportunities is a *potential* power: for individual citizens need to actively initiate and respond to CSR and public good issues to realize it. Moreover, it requires that corporations (and governments) use their powers to enable, rather than diminish, such capacities. In other words, the

potential relative increase in citizen power is partly contingent upon the corporations (and governments) who control social media (and who continue to possess significant capacities more generally) doing so in a responsible way.

Having reemphasized the paper’s overall contribution, we now turn to the lines of research it enables and suggests. Five broad lines of research stand out.

First, our paper has raised questions about the adequacy of CSR frameworks which are corporate- and stakeholder-centric. In doing so, the paper echoes historical work which looks at corporate power from a broader social perspective (e.g., Clarke 1916), and suggests that ideas of citizenship provide one particularly useful means with which to move beyond this corporate- and stakeholder-centrism. In particular, we propose that future research might investigate what role, if any, ICT corporations play in changing or maintaining citizenship identities (national or otherwise)? More broadly, we suggest that future research might investigate the ways in which ICT corporations do, or do not, impact, upon the aesthetic, ethical and political sensibilities of individual citizens. Work on ‘meta-power’ and ICTs, which looks into the ways in which ICTs facilitate interaction and potentially increase the likelihood of ideological and/or ideational transformation amongst individual citizens (e.g., Singh 2013), provide one possible point from which to explore such empirical questions.

Second, and given that social media are communicative phenomena, we suggest that work which builds on the communication constitutes organizations (CCO) perspective (Schultz et al. 2013; Schoeneborn and Trittin 2013) can help further explore the various issues we have discussed in the paper. When corporations are viewed as being communicatively constituted—i.e., socially constructed through their being talked about, written about, or ‘communicated into being’—the question arises as to whether or not the relative participatory enabling of individual citizens leads to corporations being constituted differently. More specifically, and as we have demonstrated throughout the paper, it leads to corporate CSR issues potentially being constituted in different ways, and, increasingly, by those who have traditionally been viewed as corporate ‘outsiders’: i.e., individual citizens with no functional or formal link to corporations. We thus suggest that the CCO literature provides a potentially very profitable means by which to further conceive the shifting boundaries of corporations, CSR, and social media enabled corporate–society relations.

Third, and as we have begun to highlight in our discussion of cyberterrorism, we think that an intriguing line of research relates to the ‘political materiality’ of social media and associated technologies. Thus—and whilst we have concentrated on the manner in which social media and

associated technologies can be considered “inherently political” because they can enable “individuals to consume, distribute, and create their own content without government control” (Schmidt and Cohen 2010, p. 84, 78)—we suggest that they can also be considered ‘inherently political’ for material reasons. The various technologies that enable social media for instance, place increased value on various material resources (e.g., the rare metals used in smart phones), and also lead to the construction of new forms of material infrastructure that can be the target of politically motivated attacks. Further, social media and associated technologies might be considered inherently and materially ‘unsustainable’ given the increased opportunities for consumption they enable more generally. And finally, in this specific regard, social media and associated technologies can be considered materially political in that they physically shape and direct communicative activities: e.g., Twitter messages can only be 140 characters long.

Fourth, the paper raises a whole host of interesting strategic questions. What commercial considerations, for example, result in some social media corporations (e.g., Google) appearing to play a more active role in the promotion of democracy and human rights (e.g., Schmidt and Cohen 2010)? And, are corporations more generally, increasingly likely to focus on issues, as opposed to actors (see Baron 2006, Chap. 1), given that social media makes the meaningful engagement with all potential parties (e.g., all individual citizens with internet access) effectively impossible? Future research, we suggest, might address such questions with the help of actor-centred work on institutional pressures (e.g., Oliver 1991) and CSR (Whelan 2013).

Finally, our paper also points to the need for research on a variety of normative issues. Do, for example, social media corporations have specific normative responsibilities with regard to privacy and freedom of speech? Or, how might social media corporations balance such potentially conflicting political goods as social harmony and social progression? Multi-stakeholder initiatives like the GNI, of which Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo! are all members, have begun to articulate some responsibilities in these regards (GNI). Business ethicists and CSR scholars, however, are yet to seriously analyse the normative arguments that surround these politically important issues. More generally, we suggest that the forms of corporate–society interaction that social media enable necessitate the revitalized investigation of ethical arguments for (e.g., Phillips 1997) and against (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo 2007) the limiting of CSR deliberations to those (formally/functionally organized) stakeholders that mutually benefit from corporate activities (e.g., shareholders, employees, and consumers).

Further, we propose that the various normative issues that relate to our discussion of social media and societal dysfunctions also warrant further investigation. One key issue is the very real possibility that the further spread of social media technologies will have illiberal consequences. At the time of writing it emerged that the Massachusetts-based defence corporation, Raytheon, has developed a Rapid Information Overlay Technology, or RIOT system, that would enable interested parties (e.g., governments) to mine social media information, and predict the future movements of social media users in the real and virtual world (Gallagher 2013). Accordingly, we suggest that such technologies deserve the fuller attention of normatively oriented business ethicists.

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