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Media coverage of corporate social responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The media in a democratic society has an important function to provide the citizens with timely and accurate information, as well as to furnish them with poignant elaboration and analysis of the issues involved. This is the report of the first phase of a study to examine how well the print media performed this function in relation to the concept of corporate social responsibility following the BP Gulf of Mexico oil disaster on April 20, 2010. Although the results show that there was really no discernible increase in addressing this concept, further research needs to be followed to put this finding in better perspective.

Key words: Corporate Social Responsibility; Media;

INTRODUCTION

Media and especially the press have a very special position in most democratic traditions and political theory discourses on democracy. It is given the very auspicious role of looking after and guarding public interests and preventing abuse of power by individuals and institutions in all democratic societies. The press is charged with the responsibility of brining significant issues to the attention of the populace, provide them not only with the essential facts, but also with the factual and conceptual framework to interpret, analyze and understand these issues.

Thus it is a reasonable assumption to expect accelerated, intensified and expanded coverage of the news and events that may point to gross violations of public trust, such as political corruption scandals or business' violations of laws and regulations that endanger public safety or endanger well being of large populations. Closely related to this notion is the expectation that the media expand their coverage of such news to include larger and more abstract concepts related to these events and activities.

A multi-stage research project was devised to examine how media acts and performs this function. To do so, the media is expected not only to cover the misdeeds and scandals but also to follow such news with a serious discourse on the conceptually elevated issues that are involved. Furthermore, the media is expected to present engaging discussions of the intellectual and conceptual frameworks in which public interest and trust are placed and portrayed and the impact of such "scandalous" actions/events are put in a more cogent perspective. This paper is a summary presentation of this project and the results of the first stage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of writing on the topics related to the important roles of the media and the press in a democratic society and the significance of these roles in protecting and enhancing public interest. In this section emphasis will be put on a selective number of references that cover specific, and not necessarily comprehensive, areas relevant to the issues more directly related to this paper's topic.

There are a series of *Technical Publication* from the Center for Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Global Programs, Field Support, and Research, of the U.S. Agency for International Development, which address a variety of topics related to the general issues of democracy and governance in the developing countries. One specific publication, *The Role of Media in Democracy, a Strategic Approach;* published in 1999 is a rich source of theoretical as well as practical considerations and issues regarding the roles that the media do, and should play in a democracy. The following quotation covers a large spectrum of issues related to this discussion:

> "Credible outlets enable citizens to have access to information that they need to make informed decisions and to participate in society. A media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest. The public interest is defined as representing a plurality of voices both through a greater number of outlets and through the diversity of views and voices reflected within one outlet" (Center for Democracy and Governance, 1999)

Another interesting article, in the same vein is Pamela Taylor Jackson and James Stanfield's *The role of the press in a democracy: heterodox economics and the propaganda model,* published in 2004, in which they argue that:

> "A free and independent press is one of democracy's most important institutions. The press, idealistically, plays a role in the instrumental use of knowledge by enlightening the citizenry, helping citizens to have an educated voice in the democratic process. The more diverse information voters receive the more accurate social valuations they can make. However, if an issue is distorted or muted in the press due to corporate pressure or government propaganda, as is often the case, the quality of the debate suffers and the democratic process cannot accurately assess society's problems or prescribe solutions."

Their article is a very good and concise presentation of why and how democratic societies rely on a free and active press to function well.

The United Nations also prepares and publishes many reports, many of which relate to the questions of public interest, corporate social responsibility and how the media does, and mostly does not perform its expected role in publicizing and educating the public about corporate misdeeds and/or good deed. A good example of these reports is Good News & Bad, '*The Media, Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability',* published by the United Nations Environment Programme (2003).

METHODOLOGY

The study is composed of several stages. The first phase, the subject of this report, consists of a statistical analysis of number of articles covering corporate social responsibility by four of the top major newspapers in the United States, ninety days before and ninety days after the BP oil well disaster in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010.

The assumption is that if in fact the printed media is involved in the social responsibility that is assumed it has as the guardian of public interest and information source to inform the citizenry in a democratic society, coverage of Corporate Social Responsibility should have increase in the days following the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

A survey of the articles in the *New York Times; Wall Street Journal; Christian Science Monitor* and *the Los Angeles Times* during this period was undertaken. The result is reported in Table 1, in the Appendix.

RESULTS

Results of the survey, as depicted in Table 2 in the Appendix, does not show any statistically significant difference between the coverage of the corporate social responsibility by these major daily newspapers in the United States after the BP oil spill disaster.

DISCUSSION

This study, which is essentially the pilot phase of a larger study on coverage of corporate social responsibility by major print media in the United States, indicates that the said catastrophic events which should have arguably triggered a greater coverage of this topic does not seem to have caused more coverage of this topic. Further research in the following phases of this study may further shed some light on the reason.

Nonetheless, there are a few interesting patterns that, even at this very preliminary stage of research, warrant discussion at this point:

1. Based on the commonly shared general impressions regarding the so called ideological biases of these newspapers, one expects a pronounced larger coverage of corporate social responsibility in the so-called liberal newspapers (New York Times and Los Angeles Times) in comparison with the so-called conservative ones (Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor). Data does not indicate any such pattern. In fact the largest coverage of this concept happens to happen on the pages of the Wall Street Journal, which by all observers is regarded to be the most conservative of all four papers.
2. However, the extended coverage of the corporate social responsibility by the Wall Street Journal falls very well in the general pattern of coverage by all these newspapers, namely no increase in coverage after the April 20th incident. In fact there is a slight decline in the number of article on this topic after that date.
3. Of the so-called liberal newspapers, The New York Times did in fact print more articles on the topic of corporate social responsibility after the oil spill. The Los Angeles Times also printed more articles related to this topic after the oil spill disaster, albeit not significantly more. This pattern, if it can be called a pattern, fits with the general impression of liberalism among the observers.
4. This study clearly indicates the need for further in depth research on this topic. Perhaps the next phase of this research which will involve some level of content analysis of these articles will shed adequate light on these issues, enough to provide answer to this and other questions involved.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Number of Articles with Reference to CSR in Major US Newspapers

	New York Times	Wall Street Journal	Los Angeles Times	Christian Science Monitor	Totals
Before 4/20	12	57	6	10	85
After 4/20	19	46	8	8	81
Totals	31	103	14	18	166

Table 2: Percentages of Articles with Reference to CSR in Major Newspapers

	New York Times		Wall Street Journal		Los Angeles Times		Christian Science Monitor		Totals	
	Totals	%	Totals	%	Totals	%	Totals	%	Totals	%
Before 4/20	12	40	57	55	6	43	10	56	85	51
After 4/20	19	60	46	45	8	57	8	44	81	49
Totals	31	100	103	100	14	100	18	100	166	100