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Exploring Corporations' Dialogue About CSR in the Digital Era

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Abstract In this paper, we examined how companies are employing new media to engage in dialogue with their stakeholders about corporate social responsibility (CSR)-related matters. Through a qualitative theory-building study conducted in three stages over a period of 2 years, we discovered that corporations with reputations for CSR have built virtual spaces for dialogue about CSR, but that these spaces remain empty of dialogue. Our theory-building model highlights how the mix of four dialogue processes (i.e. directing, moderating, building open-scripts, and crowd-sourcing multi-dialogue) may allow companies to create open dialogue about CSR initiatives and avoid leaving these spaces empty. Contributions for CSR studies are discussed.

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> The big problem in CSR is that companies tend to set the frame for the debate, and even when organizations claim to have a conversation with stakeholders about key CSR issues, they are actually just having conversations about the things they [the companies] have decided to have conversations about. (Interviewee)

The above quotation reveals two important things: first, that corporations engage in dialogue with stakeholders in the area of corporate social responsibility (CSR); second, that stakeholders believe that corporations may not promote open dialogue that allows collaboration or pluralistic deliberation. Rather, corporations are thought to set the frame of the debate based on their own agenda.

In recent years, the concept of company–stakeholder dialogue about CSR has resurfaced. Existing studies have noted that stakeholders perceive company-controlled information channels to be hypocritical because companies are believed to perform CSR for their own advantage instead of to benefit the community or society at large (Illia et al. 2013; Johansen and Ellerup Nielsen 2011; Morsing and Schultz 2006). These study results highlight how companies replace stakeholder information strategies with stakeholder involvement strategies in which dialogue is instrumental for their organizational image (Eisenegger and Schranz 2011). Moreover, such studies mainly analyse antecedents and outcomes of dialogue, such as facilitators of dialogue (Burchell and Cook 2008; Kuhn and Deetz 2008), barriers to dialogue (Etter et al. 2011), pillars and

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outcomes of a good dialogue (Burchell and Cook 2008; Golob and Podnar 2011; Pedersen 2006), and the functionality of dialogue for the CSR reporting activity (Hess 2008). What remains to be examined now is the black box of dialogue itself.

More needs to be known about how new media have provided corporations with new opportunities to engage in open dialogue. The majority of studies on CSR and the boom of the Internet and social media have focused on how new media have changed in the way the civil society interacts with corporations (Castelló et al. 2013). These studies highlight, for example, how new digital forms of organizing and deliberation have empowered networks of activists to contest CSR policies, bringing institutional change on CSR issues (de Bakker and Hellsten 2013); how Twitter has changed the way communication flows and brings dissent into CSR discussions (Schoeneborn and Trittin 2013; Besiou et al. 2013); how blogging decreases corporations' 'greenwashing' of their actions (Lee et al. 2013a); and how social media contributes to changes in corporate–society citizenship relations (Whelan et al. 2013). What remains unknown is whether new media may have increased the openness of corporate dialogue about CSR. Because corporations' dialogue about CSR still remains a black box, a focus on the degree of openness of dialogue presents an interesting avenue for study. Recent scholarly attention to true dialogue and corporate deliberation has resulted in calls to re-consider how companies might incorporate dialogue into their activities (Fieseler and Fleck 2013; Seele and Lock 2014). In particular, several scholars are interested in exploring the role of both instrumental (e.g. corporate websites) and deliberative (e.g. social media, blogs) communication tools.

Addressing these developments, we have designed a multi-method theory-building study to explore organizational dialogue about CSR through new lenses. Rather than examining how new media have empowered the deliberation of activist and civil society groups, we explore how they have empowered companies to initiate processes of open dialogue. In addition, we open the black box of dialogue about CSR to explore the dialogue itself. In particular, we ask the following questions: Which online spaces do companies use to dialogue about CSR (i.e. all CSR-related matters such as philosophy, policies, initiatives, and programmes)? Are companies able to establish a dialogue through their online communication outlets? If so, how do they create conversations in their corporate outlet processes about CSR that are open rather than closed?

We conducted our study in three stages over a period of 2 years. We found that corporations build online spaces that allow stakeholders to engage in dialogue. Despite these efforts, however, these dialogue spaces remain empty of dialogue, largely because companies facilitate dialogue processes that have a low degree of openness. Our theory-building model highlights how the mix of four dialogue processes (i.e. having each process active to a certain degree) allows companies to create an open dialogue and avoid leaving these spaces empty.

Conceptual Framework

Our review of the existing studies indicated that, although *dialogue* has many definitions, the majority of studies agreed upon what constitutes the degree of openness of dialogue and the importance of new media outlets for dialogue and CSR. In the following sections, we present these key concepts, which, taken together, constituted our initial conceptual framework guiding our theory-building empirical study.

Unfolding Dialogue and Openness within Social Networks

The notion of dialogue as an antecedent of stakeholder engagement and relationships is well established in the social media literature (Kent and Taylor 1998, 2002; Taylor and Kent 2014; Wigley and Lewis 2012). Different forms and understandings of dialogue exist, because all involved actors move across different settings, spaces, or timeframes (Romenti et al. 2014). Through dialogue, digital publics can also pursue various aims and objectives; these include activating collective learning processes and generating new meanings, overcoming barriers to greater knowledge sharing and understanding of discussed topics and issues, and developing sense-making, as well as a practical knowledge of organizational experiences (Cunliffe 2002; Romenti et al. 2014).

As Rockwell (2003) has argued, because the meaning of dialogue has become increasingly blurred, it is fundamental to establish specific conversational and interactional features that will enable people to distinguish authentic dialogue from other forms of exchange. For instance, Isaacs (1993) stated that it is the abandonment of preconceptions, assumptions, and convictions by those involved that differentiates dialogue from other forms of conversation, such as debates, negotiations, or mediations.

Most importantly, scholars (e.g. Mazutis and Slawinski 2008; Zoller 2004) have distinguished between open and closed dialogues—a distinction that has significant implications in the digital environment. Openness relates to both the process by which and the space in which dialogue takes place.

From a process point of view, this means that to create engagement and dialogue on social networking sites, companies should become co-oriented to individuals'

needs and cognitions and should initiate a conversation in a symmetrical way. This means that corporations should embrace the feedback they receive from digital publics in order to demonstrate their increasing responsiveness. Eisenberg and Witten (1987) note that openness is often seen as the disclosure of personal and non-personal information and as clear, unambiguous communication among parties. In this sense, dialogue on the Web is open when the parties involved share their views, positions, and values in order to develop a common ground of consensus and agreement—or, conversely, to express disagreement, differences, and antagonism. When dialogue is open, participants feel comfortable with sharing their experiences and opinions (Baker et al. 2005), encouraged by the climate of trust or the relational engagement established within dialogic patterns.

In contrast, closed dialogue focuses on co-optation, as Ganesh and Zoller (2012) have argued, and exploits language exchanges in a defensive or offensive manner (Maak and Ulrich 2007). Closed dialogue neglects the importance of listening to and reflecting on others' concerns. In times of crisis, for instance, companies often use social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to shift stakeholders' attention to topics the company considers more appropriate for consideration than the crisis itself.

When considering the spaces in which dialogue takes place, according to Corcoran (2009), open dialogic processes can occur within owned and earned environments. These spaces represent the intellectual, conceptual, and idealistic arena in which dialogue can be created. Owned spaces are spaces that are wholly controlled or owned by companies, such as organizational websites, microsites, corporate blogs, and official accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Lieb and Owyang 2012); they function as the first spaces where companies can decide to activate and maintain dialogic relationships.

Earned spaces are media spaces that are not controlled by organizations; they include user-generated content created by online stakeholders, including social media posts, tweets, pictures, and whole online communities (Lieb and Owyang 2012). Earned spaces are suitable for generating and managing word of mouth and conversations that stakeholders cultivate and maintain with each other.

In managing open dialogic relationships with stakeholders, organizations should define the online communication mix by identifying the proper spaces for dialogue. Today, combinations of different media, both earned and owned, are commonly used by corporations in order to improve the efficacy of their engagement initiatives. Straightforwardness of messages, especially within owned spaces, brings clarity. Consequently, openness and disclosure of information are enhanced.

CSR, Digital Media, and Open Dialogue

The increasing relevance and use of social media for communicating CSR initiatives is linked to the trade-off between CSR communication's credibility and its controllability; specifically, the more controllable the communicator is, the less credible he or she is (Du et al. 2010). In a digital environment, stakeholders work as critical actors who show scepticism towards corporate sources in CSR communication, as the latter are perceived to be self-interested communications (Du et al. 2010).

From the stakeholders' perspective, a company could manipulate the content of messages addressed to them through official channels. In contrast, user-generated content occurring in dialogues within online communities and stakeholders' groups, such as word of mouth, is perceived as an informal and credible channel for CSR initiatives. In this situation, one-way communication is seen as a weak and useless modality of engagement, since, as Crane and Livesey (2003, p. 46) claimed, the nature of meaning-making within the engagement process has a dialogic and interactive nature.

In other words, engaging the public in CSR programmes means finding the optimal level of self-disclosure and avoiding promotional activities that can create scepticism among stakeholders. Obviously, self-disclosure is crucial because CSR needs transparency on the part of corporations, as any responsible business has nothing to hide. As discussed above, self-disclosure about CSR and social issues is connected with openness and dialogue. After all, open dialogue in itself has deep social implications, because it puts the parties involved on the same level, removes any hierarchical differences, and encourages everyone to listen to each other without prejudices or assumptions. Self-disclosure, however, may have social adverse effects if organizations do not align their claims to corporate behaviours. For instance, when McDonald's launched a Twitter campaign by opening the hashtag #McDStories, people started sharing only critics and negative experiences, highlighting the misalignment between what the company declared and how it actually behaved. Self-disclosure is even more dangerous when a corporation faces a crisis that involves an unethical behaviour. Since open dialogue always raises stakeholder's expectations towards the conduct of a company, stakeholders may punish the company for an unfair behaviour despite the fact that it may have established with them an open dialogue. In such cases, open dialogue may even fire back, because stakeholders feel that they have been cheated.

Social media are natural platforms for dialogue that are being used increasingly intensively by corporations for the purpose of debating CSR issues. More than 70 % of *Fortune* 2000 companies use social media as an integral part of

their CSR communication strategy (Weber Shandwick 2011). Lee et al. (2013b) have argued that the more socially responsible a company is, the more the intensive use of social media to discuss CSR issues is beneficial for the company itself and for the success of related social causes. However, using social media for nurturing dialogue with stakeholders on CSR issues is not enough to create conversations. Companies should avoid 'discursive closure' pathology, in which a specific view of things is maintained, usually to one party's advantage, even after dialogue (Deetz 1992). Sustainability should adopt a 'discursive opening' approach, privileging open dialogue among companies and stakeholders, which means that the latter should be encouraged to report any discrepancies between companies' statements and reality (Christensen et al. 2013). After all, open dialogue can also emerge from disagreement, antagonistic views, and positions that have been re-negotiated.

For corporations, social media may represent powerful tools of corporate communication about CSR at different levels. Social media can be used as informational and educational tools and are increasingly being used to engage with online stakeholders about CSR topics and initiatives. As Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 67) have noted, "social media allow firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools". Using social media, organizations can implement a proactive attitude and behaviour in engaging digital consumers and stakeholders as their CSR advocates (Du et al. 2010).

However, as Seele and Lock (2014) have noted, corporations might potentially initiate dialogue not only in social media but in a wide range of online spaces, particularly those of two main types. First, instrumental online spaces (e.g. corporate websites, micro websites for CSR programmes, etc.) may allow corporations to initiate a debate on topics, programmes, and policies of importance to their corporate image. While these spaces allow for dialogue about CSR, this dialogue is more closed than open, as it is the company that uses these spaces to push information on their chosen subjects. Second, deliberate online spaces (e.g. blogs, forums, social media accounts, etc.) may allow corporations to allow others to participate more actively in the discussion of relevant issues.

The use of dialogue could be useful in the case of high-impact issues, as stakeholders may need to learn about the implications of these issues and thus profit from a learning environment. In the case of problematic issues, such as corporate decisions about local communities, environmental issues, or other CSR topics, stakeholders can use dialogue as a tool to compare themselves with others and learn from different perspectives. Corporations can be part of this learning context and may provide stakeholders with information that allows them to understand complex CSR issues (Seele and Lock 2014). If they engage in such an open dialogue, corporations can help "stakeholders [to] learn from each other the different ways that a shared messy problem can be defined. In the struggle to gain a cognitive grip on the mess, preconceived relationships between self and others changes as new learning occurs" (Payne and Calton 2002, p. 133). Social media, and digital media, in general, provide a suitable environment for this process.

RQ1: Which online spaces do companies use to dialogue about CSR (i.e. all CSR-related matters such as philosophy, policies, initiatives, and programmes)?
RQ2: Are companies able to establish a dialogue through their online communication outlets?
RQ3: If so, how do they create conversations in their corporate outlet processes about CSR that are open rather than closed?

Method

Given the importance of understanding how new media have entered into corporate activities related to dialogue about CSR, in this study, rather than conducting a deductive research design through hypothesis testing, we adopted a multi-method theory-building approach (Creswell et al. 2003; Eisenhardt 1989; Gioia and Pitre 1990). Our aim was not to create a new theory of dialogue or of CSR, but rather to develop a theory-building study that would help to account for the dialogical challenges and opportunities related to engaging stakeholders in the new media environment, given stakeholders' heightened expectations regarding CSR communication. This is an unusual approach for a theory-building study, but it is contemplated by one of the approaches illustrated by Gioia and Pitre (1990), who guided our data collection and data analysis. Following their recommendation, we collected data by identifying core cases to study, and we questioned informants about what was relevant for them in the context. Then, we analysed the data in the following two steps. First, we provided descriptions of the findings on two levels (i.e. codes that grasp reality and codes that represent the abstract concepts allowing the informants to interpret this reality); second, we formulated and evaluated conjectures (i.e. identified the relationships between constructs and evaluated those relationships by collecting new data). This approach allowed us to illustrate processes of dialogue and, consequently, how the praxis of corporations in CSR might be interpreted and, perhaps, might change if corporations seek to become more open.

In the present study, we undertook a mixed-method approach (Creswell et al. 2003) that entailed three stages of data collection and three embedded steps of analysis that combined qualitative and quantitative analysis. Such an approach advances the study of dialogue about CSR with a clear research question and broad theoretical concepts, without using research hypotheses. We used what Creswell et al. (2003) call a *sequential embedded mixed-method design*; that is, we adopted an exploratory design in which we used qualitative data (data collection step 1) to build quantitative data (data collection step 2), and then we used the qualitative data again (data collection step 3) to interpret the phenomena under study in greater depth. Following this design, the qualitative data gathered in the third step represent the core of our analysis, which allowed us to identify and understand the dialogue processes of corporations about CSR at a deep level.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected and analysed data in a three-stage process over a period of 2 years. First, we asked different kinds of stakeholders what types of online spaces they would expect corporations to implement for dialoguing about CSR. Based on the findings of this first exploratory stage, in the second stage we developed a detailed analysis of online spaces where dialogue takes place, whether through corporate outlets (e.g. corporate websites, corporate blogs) or owned social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook). This allowed us to identify online spaces where dialogue might potentially happen. The results of this second stage allowed us to identify a number of cases to be studied in depth later on. In the third phase, which constituted the core of our analysis, we explored the actual dialogue that takes place in spaces that corporations have created online. This allowed us to analyse the degree of openness and closure of corporate dialogue about CSR by studying a number of episodes of dialogue (i.e. communication exchanges) between corporations and stakeholders. Table 1 provides an overview of these three phases of the research. In the following sections, we explain each phase in detail based on the data collection and analysis that we conducted.

Stage 1: Exploring Expected Corporate Online Spaces from Stakeholders' Perspectives

In Stage 1, we conducted 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 different stakeholder profiles. Types of stakeholders we interviewed included the following: 3 employees active in CSR projects, 2 investors owning shares of companies in CSR indexes (or analysts evaluating CSR indexes), 5 governmental agencies active in the CSR area, 2 educational actors (professors and students at universities and research centres), 5 CSR professional associations, 7 NGOs active in social causes, 6 consumers sensitive to CSR, 6 journalists covering news in CSR, 2 suppliers of companies active in CSR, and 2 practitioners of CSR communication. We selected interviewees through a snowballing procedure; that is, after identifying one interviewee for each stakeholder category, we found the next interview candidate based on the previous interview. Once we reached the saturation point for interviewing (i.e. we received similar if not identical comments and opinions among stakeholder types), we stopped conducting interviews.

These interviews, which represented the exploratory starting point of our research, allowed us to identify the perceptions of a number of stakeholders active in the area of CSR. The opinion of these stakeholders regarding which companies had a good reputation for CSR was crucial for our study for two reasons. First, it allowed us to identify those companies that are known for being active in the CSR area. When a company was named by at least four different types of stakeholders, we considered it to be well known by multiple audiences and selected it for the second phase of our analysis; by this method, we identified a total of 22 companies. Second, and more importantly, the semi-structured interviews were valuable because they allowed us to explore how stakeholders viewed dialogue in the CSR area and, specifically, in which dialogue spaces they preferred to participate when conversing with corporations about CSR. This stakeholder perspective was particularly important for us to understand because our study aimed to explore the degree of openness of corporate dialogue about CSR. Failing to take stakeholders' perceptions of corporate dialogue as a starting point would have led us to merely analyse corporate dialogue practices, resulting in only descriptive results about practice (i.e. we would be exploring the 'what', or which dialogue spaces characterize the practice of corporations), rather than taking the first stage of a theory-building study about how dialogue spaces allow openness of corporate dialogue (i.e. exploring the 'how', or which dialogue spaces are the base of a process that stakeholders perceive to be inclusive of them). Hence, this phase was the first important layer in which we embedded our study and from which we developed all the instruments and interpretation that followed in the other stages of analysis.

To analyse interviews, we conducted a qualitative analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994)—specifically, a thematic analysis (Gioia et al. 2013). Figure 1 presents our emerging data structure. Two researchers shared their opinions about quotations from the interviews, reached an agreement as to how to classify patterns of responses, and shared their results with the other members of the research team.

Table 1 Data collection and analysis

Stage and type of analysis	Source of data	Type of analysis	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Stage 1: Exploring CSR dialogue from stakeholders' perspectives	40 interviews with 10 stakeholder's profiles[a]	Thematic analysis of interviews	Opinions of a variety of stakeholders that might be engaged in the practice of dialoguing about CSR	Explore stakeholders' views of what an open dialogue about CSR is Complete list of well-reputed corporations in CSR Learn more about expectations of stakeholders Build codebook for Stage 2
Stage 2: Identify online spaces where CSR dialogue takes place	Corporate outlets of companies selected from 33 different CSR indexes[b] Any online space owned by these corporations	Codebook of dialogue spaces	Instrumental and deliberative spaces: Corporate websites Corporate CSR blogs Twitter CSR company account YouTube corporate channels	Identify whether corporations have put in place online spaces for dialogue Identify top companies having an ongoing dialogue to be analysed in Stage 3
Stage 3: Analyse actual dialogue that is taking place	In-depth analysis of 21 in-depth cases 150 episodes of actual dialogue (i.e. conversation) among 25 companies	Thematic analysis of dialogue	Corporate websites Corporate CSR blogs Twitter CSR company account YouTube corporate channels	Identify degree of openness vs. closure of dialogue Identify dialogue processes between corporations and online users

[a] Type of stakeholders we interviewed included the following: Employees active in CSR projects, Investors owning shares of companies in CSR indexes, Governmental Agencies active in CSR area, Educational Actors (Professors and students at Universities and Research Centres), CSR Professional Associations, NGOs active on social causes, Consumers sensitive toward CSR, Journalists, Suppliers, and Practitioners in CSR

[b] Indices considered for selection of companies include the following: the world's most ethical companies in five industries such the banking, energy and utilities, financial services, insurance, and telecom industries; the Boston College-reputation institute CSR index; the Dow Jones Sustainability World, North American, Asia Pacific, Europe, Euro Zone, Korean indexes; the financial times' corporate responsibility index; the Fortune 500 index; the FTSE4Good global, US, Europe, Japan, UK Index; the Lundquist CSR Online Awards Global Leaders, Germany, Italy, Switzerland indexes; the MERCO most responsible Spanish companies' index; The M&E/LF Sustainability Ranking top Six large Latin American banks' index; the Sustainable Asset Management Collaboration with Dow Jones; the Sustainable Bank of the YEAR FT/IFC Sustainable financial conference award Americas, Cross-regional and Europe Index; and the SMI social media sustainability Index

Following the pattern of analysis suggested by Gioia et al. (2013), we first re-read each interview transcript several times to identify first-order codes, which, in the-matic analysis, represent recurrent topics identified by interviewees. In our case, first-order codes referred to dialogue spaces that stakeholders expected corporations to implement. We followed this process until we could not identify any more first-order codes.

Second, we began to identify similarities and differences among first-order codes; this enabled us to cluster them in second-order themes (i.e. common patterns emerging from the interviews). In our case, second-order themes referred to categories of benefits that stakeholders expected to gain from engaging in dialogue about CSR in specific digital spaces. As Fig. 1 shows, stakeholders concurred in naming three main benefits: (1) learning and acquiring knowledge about CSR; (2) developing new ideas and participating in innovative CSR; and (3) becoming involved in decisions about CSR policies and, consequently, changing the way corporations fulfil their CSR. A number of dialogue spaces facilitated such benefits. For example, spaces that stakeholders named as building blocks for the first benefit (learning) included microsites on CSR projects where people can express opinions and ask questions, videos educating users on CSR issues, and knowledge and educational centres on CSR. Dialogue spaces that would allow stakeholders access to the second benefit (innovating) included forums/portals (i.e. the media-based site where dialogue can be implemented) that allowed users to develop a collective agenda on future issues, view videos of roundtable discussions debating the future of CSR, and participate in project competitions to innovate in CSR. Dialogue spaces that would allow stakeholders access to the third benefit (involvement in decision making) included voting systems on the best projects a company should focus on and invitations to comment on corporate decisions about CSR. These last two items differ from those mentioned for the other two benefits in that they relate to projects that are

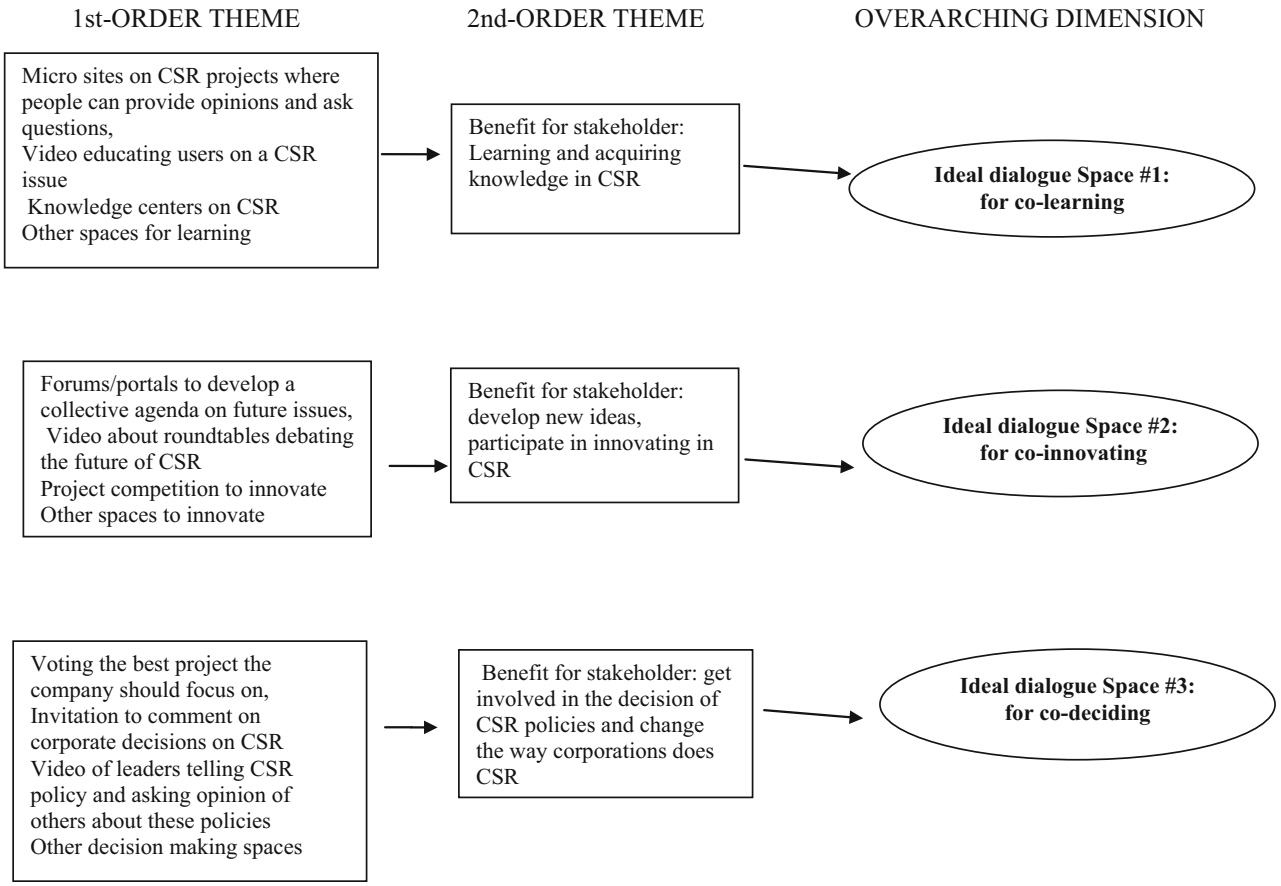

Fig. 1 Data structure of Stage 1 exploring stakeholder's ideal dialogue spaces online

decided on by the company (rather than those that are decided on in collaboration with stakeholders).

Once we had a clear picture of the emerging second-order themes, we assembled them into overarching dimensions (i.e. theoretical concepts that mirror emerging patterns of the analysis). In our case, the overarching dimensions described the expected categories of dialogue space about CSR. In order to categorize dialogue spaces, we kept in mind Seele and Lock's (2014) observations about instrumental and deliberative dialogue spaces. However, the picture emerging from our data indicated that, beyond considering online spaces as deliberative and instrumental, we could qualify them based on sub-categories of spaces, depending on the type of function that each space had for stakeholders. Following thematic analysis guidelines, it was in this last phase of analysis that we compared our emerging findings with theories of dialogue in order to label and characterize the dialogue spaces. These three benefits expected by stakeholders while dialoguing about CSR were discussed in the management literature and correlated with the three main spaces for dialoguing about CSR: (1) co-learning spaces, (2) co-innovating spaces, and (3) co-deciding spaces.

Specifically, the knowledge management literature (e.g. Nonaka and Toyama 2002; Tsoukas 2009) helped us make sense of the emerging spaces for learning, because it discussed the creation of a number of dialogue spaces in which to co-learn—that is, to share and build new knowledge. In addition, the innovation literature (e.g. Ford and Ford 1995; Jacobs and Heracleous 2005) was valuable to us for interpreting findings related to spaces for innovation, because it discussed a number of dialogue practices and spaces in which to co-innovate—that is, to change perspectives and develop new ideas. Finally, the strategy literature (e.g. Huisman 2001; Liedtka and Rosenblum 1996) was valuable in helping us understand findings related to spaces for collaborative decisions, because it discussed a number of dialogue practices for building organizational actions, decisions, and strategic programmes.

Stage 2: Exploring Corporate Online Spaces Where CSR Dialogue Takes Place

Step 2 focused on building our analytical instruments and selecting our sample of companies to study. We built our sample through a two-phase sampling procedure. The 22

companies we identified from interviews in Stage 1 provided a good starting ground, but we were aware that analysing only their dialogue spaces and processes could bias our findings, because results would depend only on our exploratory interviews. To avoid such bias, we selected additional corporations through non-statistical purposive sampling. Given that there is no definitive list of well-reputed companies in the CSR area, we selected companies based on their appearance as top companies on 33 diverse CSR-related indices (Table 1 shows the details of these). These corporations are investing resources in creating value for society and are recognized for doing so. Therefore, they may be in the best position, both economically (having resources to invest in dialogue) and socially (having the pressure to create dialogue), to open themselves to dialogue about CSR. In order to qualify for selection, companies had to appear in at least three indices and had to operate at an international level. Through this procedure, we identified 70 corporations to add to the 22 initially named by stakeholders. As seven corporations appeared on both lists, we ended up with a total of 95 corporations to study in Stage 2.

Because our two-phase sampling procedure does not allow us to generalize our results, we classified the companies in our sample in order to identify the industries and countries our companies belonged to (categorized by where they were headquartered). This enabled us to be mindful about the limits within which we could interpret our findings. Our results relate mainly to how dialogue is incorporated into the operations of companies that operate within five different industries (banking and insurance, telecommunications and IT, retail, transportation, and pharmaceuticals and energy) and have headquarters in 14 different countries (Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

We analysed corporate online spaces where CSR dialogue takes place using a codebook (Neuendorf 2012; Weber 1990) built through the findings from interviews with stakeholders conducted in Stage 1. Some examples of the identified dialogue spaces are illustrated in Fig. 1. In the preliminary interviews, we collected a total of 49 first-order codes (20 for learning, 17 for innovation, and 12 for decision making), which constituted the 49 variables in our codebook. We used scores ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) to indicate the intensity and type of conversation spaces that companies have in their online outlets and owned social media. This type of content analysis follows a latent pattern approach (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999); that is, the existence of a phenomenon is determined by the frequency of its occurrence in the content analysed.

We analysed these data through the statistical technique of factor analysis performed through Principal Component Analysis. Our main aim was to confirm the existence within the online operations of companies of the three dialogue space categories—co-learning, co-innovating, and co-deciding—identified in the first preliminary phase as those expected by stakeholders. For the analysis, we used the software program SAS 9.0. This quantitative analysis of dialogue spaces, however, only determined which companies have created the opportunity for themselves to engage in a dialogue that satisfies stakeholders' needs to co-learn, co-innovate, and co-decide in CSR-related matters; it did not determine whether such dialogue was really happening in an open way and, if so, through what process. For this reason, Stage 3 explored actual episodes of dialogue occurring in these online spaces.

Stage 3: Analysing Actual Dialogue About CSR and Its Degree of Openness

In Stage 3, we re-coded the 95 companies selected for Stage 2 with the same codebook; however, this time we used scores ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) to indicate whether companies were having actual dialogue in the 49 dialogue spaces. This content analysis followed a latent projective content analysis approach (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999); that is, it indicated that a phenomenon existed based on the judgment of the coder about how intensively an item represented a dialogue episode in a dialogue space. In this context, coders had to evaluate whether a dialogue episode referred to a conversation happening synchronously simultaneously (i.e. in same time zone) or asynchronously (e.g. sequentially in different time zones in a forum) or whether it was represented (e.g. in a video or testimonial) or was taking place in real time (e.g. in a chat). When a dialogue space of a corporation existed but did not actually instigate an episode of dialogue, it was rated as 1 in the codebook, whereas when it fostered episodes of dialogue more or less intensively, it was rated from 2 to 5 in the codebook.

Based on this coding, we found that 26 companies were worthy of further qualitative exploration because, even if some of their conversations had a low degree of participation, others had a high degree of participation and thus afforded actual dialogue for analysis. These 26 companies, therefore, were useful for us to understand the process through which the episodes of dialogue were taking place. To this end, we again conducted a qualitative thematic analysis (Gioia et al. 2013), but this time we focused on dialogue episodes actually taking place in the conversation spaces established by corporations. Figure 2 presents our emerging data structure for the data analysis in Stage 3. For the other thematic analysis, two researchers shared their

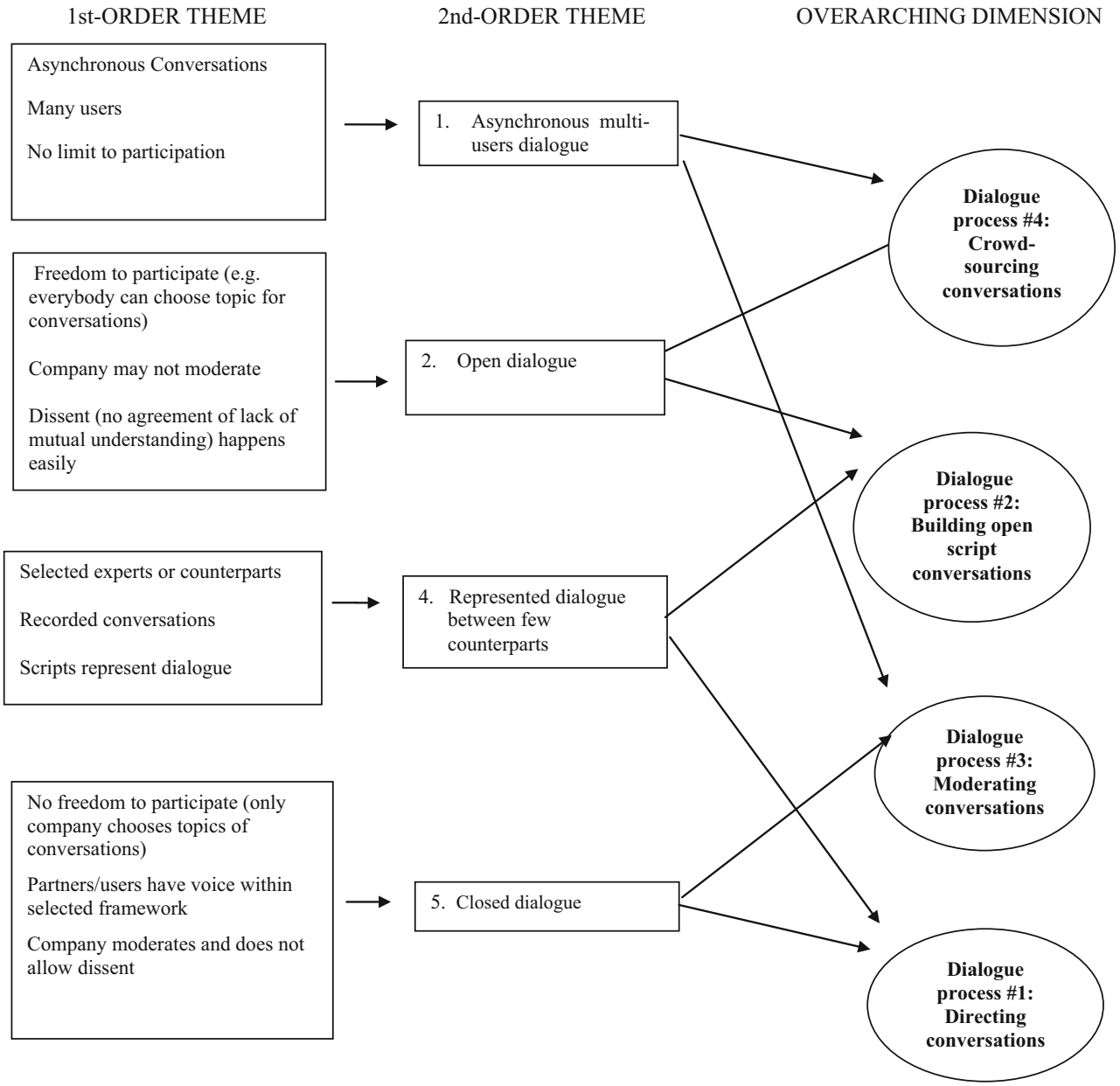

Fig. 2 Data structure of Stage 3 exploring actual dialogue episodes

opinions about the conversations that were occurring and came to an agreement about how to classify patterns of responses in first- and second-order themes and overarching dimensions. After reaching such agreement, they labelled the overarching dimension. In total, we classified 150 episodes of dialogue for the 26 corporations in the Stage 3 data analysis. Below, we explain how we identified and analysed them.

Following the guidelines of Gioia et al. (2013) for thematic analysis, we first repeatedly re-read extracts of dialogue narratives appearing online to identify first-order codes. Each first-order code describes the type of conversation taking place by qualifying an episode of in the following way. We considered an episode of dialogue to start when either a company or a user started a conversation (synchronous, asynchronous, or reported in a video or text) in one of the corporate spaces of co-learning, co-innovation, and co-decision, and we considered it to end when the thread of the conversation died (i.e. when answers stop). The boundaries to qualify the process of dialogue emerged from the observation of how many actors were involved in the conversation, the degree to which the conversation was moderated by the company, the degree of freedom to choose the topics upon which to converse, and the dissent that emerged in the conversation. We followed this process until we could not identify any additional first-order codes.

Consequently, we started identifying similarities and differences among our observations in these conversations, which enabled us to qualify dialogue and categorize episodes of dialogue as follows. We identified asynchronous dialogue occurring freely with many users; open dialogue with low moderation by the company, freedom to choose topics, and the possibility of expressing dissent; represented dialogue, in which few counterparts participated and the company decided the script of the video or text in which the dialogue was reported; and, finally, closed dialogue, where the company controlled topics and moderated the discussion and where dissent did not emerge.

Ultimately, we assembled the four emerging second-order themes (see Fig. 2) into four overarching dimensions that described the dialogue processes taking place between corporations and stakeholders. We found that in the dialogue spaces of co-learning, co-innovating, and co-decision, several different processes of dialogue could take place: (1) a process of crowd-sourcing conversations (i.e. an open and asynchronous multi-stakeholder dialogue process); (2) a process of building up open-script conversations (i.e. an open and represented dialogue process happening among few counterparts); (3) a process of moderating conversations (i.e. a closed and asynchronous multi-stakeholder dialogue process); and, finally, (4) a process of directing conversations (i.e. a closed dialogue among few counterparts). In this last phase of categorization in particular, we compared our emerging findings with theories of dialogue in order to label and characterize the CSR-specific dialogue process type based on the results of previous studies (e.g. Du et al. 2010; Lee et al. 2013b; Payne and Calton 2002).

Findings

Stakeholders Expect Three Main Online CSR Dialogue Spaces

From Stage 1, we found that stakeholders expect three ideal online CSR dialogue spaces: (1) space for co-learning, (2) space for co-innovating, and (3) space for co-deciding. Table 2 provides examples of interview quotations.

Online Space #1: Designed for Co-learning

Although a dialogue space that is ideal for a journalist may not be ideal for experts in CSR or NGOs, our data structure shows that stakeholders held similar ideas of what would be an ideal dialogue space that allowed for a true open conversation with corporations about CSR. In fact, the majority of interviewed stakeholders expected to learn from the conversations they established with corporations (see Fig. 1 in the method section).

However, many of respondents claimed that when companies depicted themselves as personalized listeners on a regular basis, the relationship very often remained sterile, as summarized in the following quotation:

> It's totally useless to send sterile and detached emails or customized messages. I would like to write to someone and receive a personalized answer to my simple and concrete concern […] too often I feel I receive mechanic answers for a question I did not ask

This quotation does not mean that corporations simply need to customize their dialogue. It means that stakeholders often simply query companies to receive simple and concrete answers to everyday practical problems. When stakeholders engage in a dialogue with a company, they expect to learn something useful for them as human beings or as professionals (see Table 2 for examples of quotations).

Space #2: Designed for Co-innovating

A second main finding in the data structure (see Fig. 1 in our method section) was that stakeholders expect companies to engage in dialogue spaces that allow everybody (i.e. the company, users, etc.) to be open to new ways of innovating in the implementation and promotion of CSR-related matters. Stakeholders feel that corporations have been setting the agenda for a long time, and they often question the way CSR-related matters have been managed. These ideal dialogues would involve audiences in discussions about the future of CSR-related matters. In fact, our findings reveal that online CSR spaces should not merely inform the way corporations create value for society, but rather should inform the corporation about new (i.e. future) ways of doing so (see Table 2 for example quotations).

Space #3: Designed for Co-deciding

Another finding that emerged from our data structure was that respondents speaking as stakeholders expected a third online CSR dialogue space around co-deciding. However, although they found great benefit in these types of outlets, they also noted that these spaces are especially controversial. The majority of stakeholders considered any initiative attempting to develop conversations that included stakeholders in decision making about CSR policies to be utopian, abstract, and consequently difficult to implement. Stakeholders lacked trust in corporations and thus believed that companies could not include stakeholders in conversations that involved co-decision making without aiming to control the conversation. Hence, although stakeholders

Table 2 Dialogue space designed for co-learning, co-innovating, and co-deciding

Co-learning	
Increase knowledge through clarity and transparency	"In my field, clarity, transparency, and knowledge represent necessary elements.… I'm personally more interested in being involved within dialogue situations where a company could show its ability to answer my needs and questions as well as provide detailed and data-based information…"
Evidence and learning	"CSR communication should move beyond blah, blah, blah, by evidencing their wish to promote initiatives that will help stakeholders to learn sometimes things are easier and simpler.… Empowering others to be responsible toward his or her neighbor is a good start"
Understanding and learning	"… I would like to understand better what matters in society…. If a company could tell me what it or others in its industry are doing for our society […] what normal people are doing.… I could better understand … if I am also helping society"
Explanation, awareness, and knowledge	"Knowledge creation, the explanation of themes and topics, represents the first step towards a real listening and awareness process. Knowledge, awareness, and listening are the basis for a proper dialogue"
Co-innovating	
Long-term CSR co-innovation	"…they should stop to think about what is relevant today…. Interacting in a simple way with audiences is what allows them to stop being egocentric and to look at what society really needs in the long term"
Innovation for social context	"This way [having in place a forum to debate how to innovate CSR], an organization doesn't position itself first, and directs its attention to the subjects under discussion… and to the real perspectives and expectations of the social context in which the organization operates"
Co-deciding	
Re-consideration decisions	"If social responsibility means to show something more compared to the traditional activity and business, dialoguing to re-consider decisions enables [one] to achieve this aim, because through this dialogue [one] is able to show that [one] is doing more than the traditional activities…"
Involvement and opinion	"… it could be interesting for me to be involved and to give my opinion about a specific initiative.…"
Co-decision implies a hidden agenda	"… but I am not sure if at the end this really happens, because every company has a hidden agenda.…"
Co-decision implies doubts	"…From the other side, I always have doubts on how far this opinion may be taken into consideration. My suggestion might be less important than previous plans.…"

desired to have such spaces for dialogue, they also viewed them with particular scepticism. The last two quotations in Table 2 are examples of such doubts.

Dialogue Spaces are Widespread, but They Remain Empty of Dialogue

From Stage 2 of our analysis, we found that, in their operations, companies included many dialogue spaces in which to co-learn and co-innovate (i.e. dialogue spaces 1 and 2) but not spaces in which to co-decide (i.e. dialogue space 3). The factorial analysis showed that two principal factors explain about 88 % of the total variance in the way companies include dialogue spaces in their operations. The first factor (see the two upper quadrants in Fig. 3), which explained 80 % of the variance, is related to dialogue spaces that privilege co-learning and co-innovating in regard to CSR-related matters. The second factor (see the two lower quadrants in Fig. 3), which explained 8 % of the variance, is related to tools that allow for dialogue or co-decision in regard to CSR-related matters. The remaining 12 % of the variance cannot be explained by these two factors.

When we ran the factorial analysis by industry, again, we found that the two factors that predominated in our sample related to spaces of co-learning and co-innovating. In this case, the first factor (dialogue spaces for learning and innovation) explained 87 % of the sample, particularly the dialogue actions of companies within the bank/insurance and telecommunications/IT industries; on the other hand, the second factor (dialogue spaces for decision making) explained only 12 % of the variance in our sample, particularly the online dialogue actions of companies in the automobile and transportation industry.

These findings initially suggest that corporations are facilitating a number of online spaces that allow them to potentially engage in dialogue in ways that are preferred by stakeholders. However, less than 20 % of such spaces are successful. Stakeholders do not participate in the dialogue as companies expect, as indicated by the fact that the spaces provided for conversation remained empty of dialogue. Following our theory-building approach and steps suggested by Gioia and Pitre (1990) for a theory-building study that allows the researcher to unveil corporate processes, we re-examined our interviews in an attempt to make sense of these results. We considered that

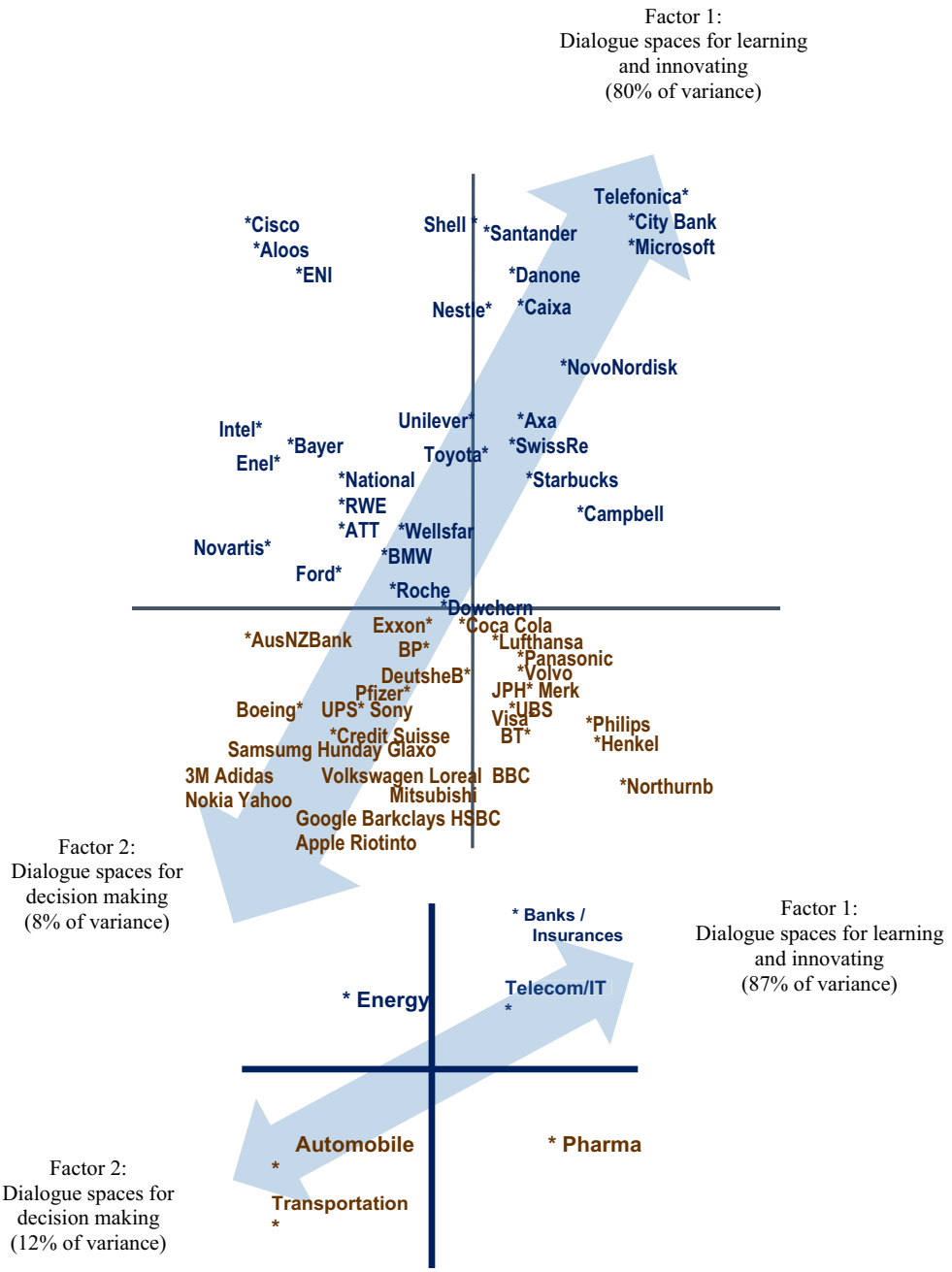

Fig. 3 Dialogue Spaces by companies and by industry

stakeholders might feel that corporations that try to engage them in a dialogue often set the confines of the dialogue too tightly, making real dialogue impossible. The quotation we provide at the beginning of the paper, before the introduction, summarizes this argument, which is shared by many stakeholders. Hence, in order to advance the theory of dialogue about CSR, it is essential to gain an in-depth understanding of the dialogue processes corporations actually follow when having conversations with stakeholders. In the next section, we describe our findings about these main dialogue processes.

Four Main Dialogue Processes

From Stage 3 of our analysis, we found that 19 corporations engaging effectively in dialogue with stakeholders combined different types of co-creation processes (see Fig. 4): (1) directing conversations, (2) building open-script conversations, (3) moderating conversations, and (4) crowd-sourcing conversations.

These four different dialogue processes allow for varying degrees of openness (vertical axis) and representation (horizontal axis) of dialogue (see Fig. 4). We found that

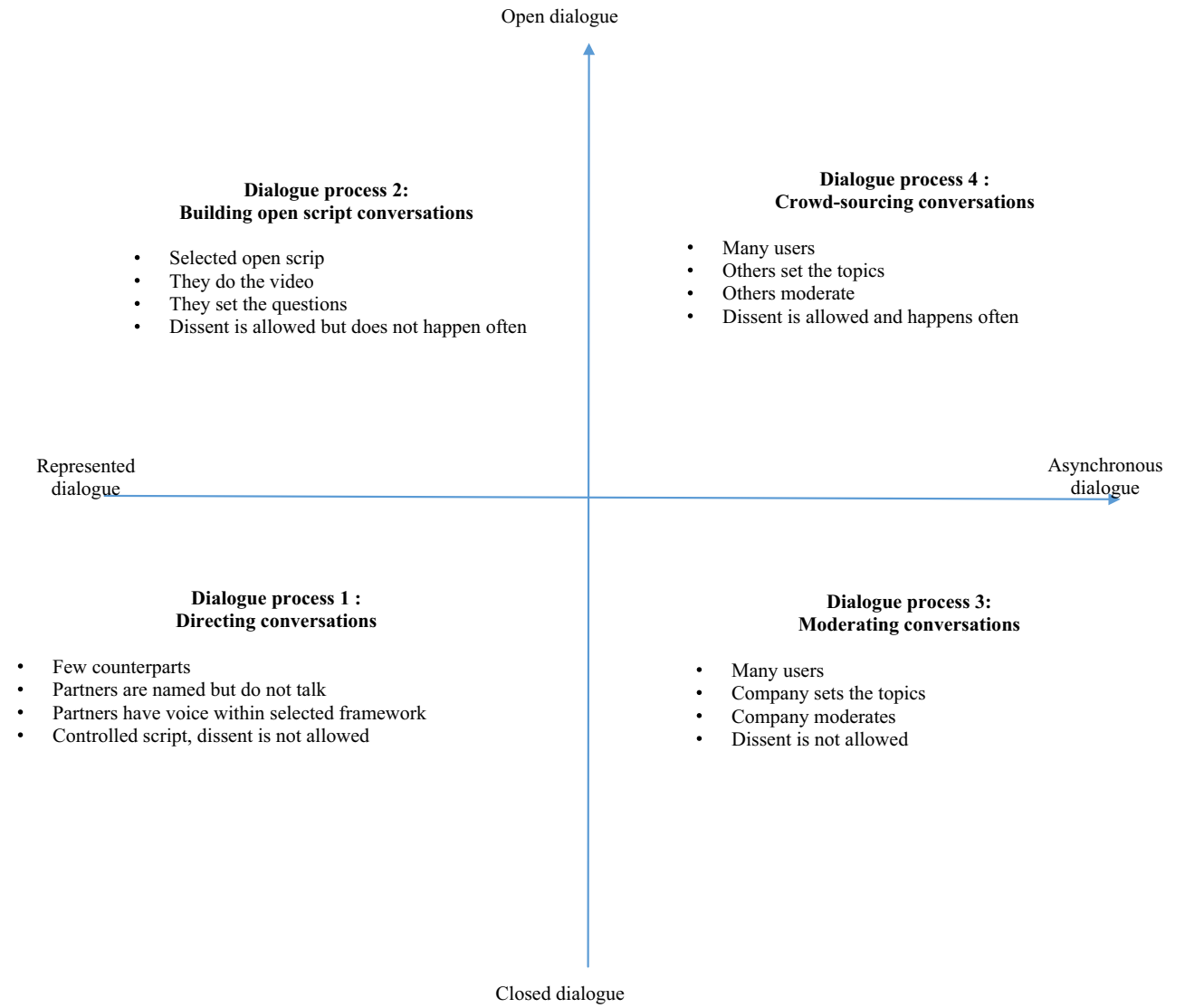

Fig. 4 Four processes allowing dialogue within the online spaces of corporations

these 19 corporations were combining these four processes of dialogue, rather than privileging only one of them. Corporations were, to a certain degree, initiating a dialogue that is directed and moderated by the corporation on the one hand and that is more crowd-sourced and open-script on the other. This does not mean that corporations had a perfect balance or high degrees of each dialogue process. They had the four of them combined at least to a minimum degree, sometimes expressing a dialogue more than the other.

In the following sections, we provide examples and evidence of these four types of dialogue processes through representative companies (although all of these companies included a mix of varying degrees of the different dialogue processes). The example quotations will be shorter for the moderated and directed dialogue processes than for the open-script and crowd-sourced processes because the latter two types of dialogue, by allowing more openness, allow for more and longer conversations.

Dialogue Process #1: Directing Dialogue

A directed dialogue in CSR does not take place asynchronously in online platforms but instead is represented online by a corporation producing, for example, a video or a narration about a CSR project, in which one of its partners in CSR answers questions or comments on only specific parts of the project. Thus, the company has complete control over what is said, and counterparts are often merely mentioned in passing or briefly quoted. The corporation directs and sets the frame for the conversation and does not allow dissent.

Examples of this type are episodes of dialogue with BP regarding the Bulwer refinery in Australia, a project that promotes dialogue between managers and workers in petroleum sites in the sea, and with CISCO about its "Connected Healthy Children", a project that transforms children's healthcare through collaborative technologies. The two companies set a framework for a programme and included partnerships with other social actors; however, the counterparts had a voice only within a defined framework determined by the companies.

The following is an example of directed dialogue from BP's Bulwer refinery project in Australia. Although the dialogue did not end up creating a positive solution for employees later on, BP has made an interesting CSR effort to promote dialogue between managers and workers in petroleum sites in the sea. The dialogue's objective is to change the company's procedures to "reduce risk and improve the quality of its operations". The refinery has implemented an initiative called "Site Alignment" that aims to improve two-way communication and align the objectives of senior management and the frontline workforce. The site has started to see significant benefits from this process: spills were cut in half, and safety incidents were cut by two-thirds. BP represents the dialogue within a defined framework through the video production. Employees have a voice and express their views, but the company sets the framework (e.g. the script of the video) and edits the video. The participants are not all represented equally: managers have a voice and speak on camera, but employees do not speak and are only seen in images and small written quotations. The dialogue process is controlled, and dissent, if any exists, is not represented. The video explains the dialogue process; however, the dialogue is moderated to avoid confrontation (using facilitators and up-down-up discussions with clear objectives). In addition, only a few counterparts are included, such as employees and managers. Two extracts of the conversations that take place in the video are as follows:

> *BP manager speaking on camera:* "The process involves a series of discussions in which employees' unedited opinions are revealed to senior management. Then the workforce and management together draw an action plan to help the site improve".
> *Employee (not speaking, represented in image and quote):* "I have been in the background over the last 12 years, and this was an opportunity to get involved in the things I really care about".

Dialogue Process #2: Building Open-Script Dialogue

Similar to a directed dialogue, an open-script dialogue implies that a few selected counterparts (e.g. experts in a debate, partners participating in a CSR project) take part in the conversation. In contrast to what happens in a directed dialogue, here the company confers on counterparts some degree of control over the interaction. Such is the case, for example, when the videos are produced by the counterpart or, if they are produced by the corporation, when the partner or expert selects the questions. In this way, the script of the dialogue remains open to some degree of spontaneity, and there is a place for dissent. This does not happen often, however, as usually companies choose to engage with mostly favourable counterparts.

We found examples of this type of dialogue in the cases of Danone, Eni, and IBM. In Danone's co-creation project, NGOs have strategic partnerships with the company to conduct development projects. Danone gives these counterparts the freedom to tell their own story about the project. Also, the counterparts often moderate the intervention of the corporation in expressing opinions about the project. In contrast, Eni launched a project with Amnesty International to improve Eni's impact on human rights in the Niger Delta. In this case, Eni does not provide a narration of the project but instead links to a report from the NGO that narrates the progress of the common initiative. In this report, there are numerous testimonials from multiple parties involved, all of which are moderated by Amnesty International rather than by Eni. Another example of such dialogue is found in the case of IBM, which has created, with other partners, a knowledge centre and Technological Academy (secondary school) called PTECH. The success story of PTECH is narrated through the multiple corporate websites of the PTECH main partners, where the counterparts narrate their experience supporting and participating in the project. These narrations take place through either video or articles that quote interviews from the side of the counterparts. From the narrations of politicians who write or talk about their experiences, we offer an extract that represents what the counterparts say about the collaboration with IBM on the PTECH project (IBM's only other counterpart taking part in the conversation was a group of teachers, which highlights the fact that only selected third parties participated in the open-script dialogue):

> *Politician collaborating with IBM:* "Let's also make sure that a high school diploma puts our kids on a path to a good job.… At schools like PTECH in Brooklyn, a collaboration between New York Public Schools, the City University of New York, and IBM, students will graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree in computers or engineering. We need to give every American student opportunities like this".

Dialogue Process #3: Moderating Dialogue

Unlike the previous two forms, a moderated dialogue takes place asynchronously through online platforms, forums, or social media. All users may potentially participate freely in such a dialogue, without having to register or become a member to access the platform. The company invites users to discuss specific social issues and moderates the discussions. Anyone interested in discussing the topic (e.g. sustainable cities) may participate. Users, however, are only allowed to answer questions proposed by the corporation, which decides what topics will be discussed. As the corporation filters every opinion published in the forum, dissent is very rare.

One example of a company that uses this dialogue process is Starbucks, through their My Starbucks Idea. This is a "cloud computing platform" where customers can share their ideas, propositions, and complaints. Through this forum, readers can vote and comment on others' ideas and can read about the ideas that have been put into practice by the company, as explained on the webpage. Some of the ideas are linked to the company's CSR policies, programmes, and initiatives, such as the following implemented customer idea. This post about recycling obtained 90,490 positive votes, and the company also issued a posting that summarized the improvements made on this popular idea. Here, we provide extracts of this dialogue process:

> *Posted Idea:* "… Starbucks should offer nationwide recycling at their stores. A lot of their competitors do it (aka Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf). Seeing as recycling and going green is the new hot thing, it would really boost PR and be a great new ad campaign".
> *Company moderation comments:* "Lots of progress has happened on this idea. Thanks for sharing your ideas, votes, and comments with us. Learn more about Starbucks recycling efforts here: http://sbux.co/GGVspP".
> *Reader 1 comment:* "… Starbucks need to start recycling those Starbucks cups NOW!! Starbucks is all over the world and Starbucks creates a HUGE amount of throwaway plastics—what a terrible waste!!! WHY NOT use 'plastic' ware made from CORN??!!! Why not use paper cups? And for those people who live in areas where that kind of plastic IS recycled, take your Starbucks cups home with you and recycle them, even if you live in a different state from where that Starbucks is located!!"
> *Reader 2…..*

Dialogue Process #4: Crowd-Sourcing Multi-dialogue

Similar to a moderated dialogue, a crowd-sourced multi-dialogue takes place online asynchronously and allows many users to take part. In contrast to what happens in a moderated dialogue, here the topics can be proposed by outsiders (i.e. actors not necessarily involved with the company). The person or organization that proposes the topic often leads the discussion. This type of dialogue can be found, for example, in knowledge centres for CSR-related matters, where users share their experiences and opinions on social issues. Here, dissent, expressed as different points of view or criticism toward current policies and practices of the corporation, is allowed.

One example of the process of crowd-sourcing dialogue is the platform of the company Telefonica called Rconversa, described as a "Platform for online dialogue". The platform proposes debates on CSR issues such as information technologies in the health industry, new IT, education, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Debates are moderated by an expert who may or may not be linked with the company. Any user can launch a new topic, which makes the platform dynamic. Debates have a clear calendar with phases for different discussions, as illustrated by the following extracts from a dialogue on technology and education. At the end of the debate, the moderator writes a conclusion. The following quotations summarize this process of crowd-sourced dialogue. It can be noted that the number of quotations is greater compared to the other type of dialogue processes because there is actually more open dialogue in this format:

> *Beginning of Conversation, User 1*: "… MOOCs have been the focus of many different critiques, even though nobody doubts the high quality standard of their contents.… In this thread I would like to discuss MOOC contents, focusing on different factors …. Feel free to begin from wherever you want and jump from one question to other. Really all questions are very interrelated".
> *User 2 comment*: "From my point of view these contents are almost a commodity and MOOCs should provide more than easy access to undifferentiated contents having different quality".
> *User 1 moderating comment of user 2:* "Thank you very much for your comment. An issue that has not been covered and must be discussed is the methodologies. After all, MOOCs just repeat old methodologies based on knowledge disclosure.… Can we think of new methodologies on the Internet?"
> *User 3 comment:* "Concerning methodologies. The final objective of MOOC or its context could lead us to use or present one type of content or another.… In the end, heterogeneity will always happen…. An example of how to work with that heterogeneity can be seen on.…"

User 1 moderating comment of user 3: "… I agree with user 3 about the role of technology in helping us to fight against the diversity of a group of apprentices. However, I still have serious doubts about MOOCs as fashion in education sold and launched in 2012 … but I think that an educational revolution should begin before.…"
User 4 comment: "I agree with you (user 1), if there is a new disclosure system, teaching, education and formation…, we need to also consider a change in methodologies […]
User 2 comment: "The percentage of enrolled students who actually finish the MOOC (7 % to 10 %) is one of the negative aspects often mentioned when talking about MOOCs…"

Discussion

In this study, we sought to identify the types of online spaces different types of stakeholders expect corporations to employ for dialogue about CSR-related matters and some of the different types of co-creational processes companies use for engaging in such dialogue. Specifically, we identified three types of online dialogue spaces—those designed for co-learning, co-innovating, and co-deciding—that stakeholders most value as places in which to interact with corporations on CSR issues. The main conclusion we can draw from our study is that these outlets, with their respective dialogue spaces, are used very frequently by corporations. In particular, corporations build online spaces for stakeholders to engage in dialogue so that the latter can learn about and participate in innovation on CSR-related matters. Despite these efforts, however, these dialogue spaces remain empty because companies typically facilitate dialogue processes that have a low degree of openness. In this regard, we have identified four main dialogue processes, two that are more open (crowd-sourcing conversations and building open-script conversations) and two that are more closed (directing conversations and moderating conversations). As our emerging theoretical model shows (see Fig. 5), stakeholders participate in dialogue when corporations mix the four types of dialogue rather than only privileging the more open ones.

As shown in the upper left-hand section of Fig. 5, directed and moderated dialogue, if not combined with the other two types of dialogue, generates a corporate monologue rather than a dialogue. This happens despite corporations' efforts to establish a number of online spaces in which to converse and help stakeholders learn (e.g. knowledge and educational centres), innovate (e.g. forums to debate next steps for CSR), and co-decide (e.g. voting systems for future corporate CSR programmes). Directed dialogue allows for the participation of very few counterparts (e.g. partners of the company, specific experts) and facilitates a conversation only within a certain framework (e.g. topic, parameters) determined by the corporation. Stakeholders involved in these conversations have rather passive voices, and online users end up not participating through questions and comments because they feel that the corporation is not open to a real dialogue. Moderated dialogue welcomes the participation of many users and stakeholders; hence, by nature, it is more open than directed dialogue. Nevertheless, the company moderates all interactions, limiting them to certain topics within the agenda of the corporation. Thus, this dialogue also has a low degree of openness, and stakeholders do not engage in further conversations about the topics posted.

As shown in the right-hand side of Fig. 5, when the four processes are integrated, corporations are able to generate a dialogue in which participation is high. The outcome here is different because the corporation balances directing and moderating the dialogue with crowd-sourcing conversations and building open-script conversations with stakeholders. When corporations mix these four dialogue processes, all dialogue spaces, even the moderated and directed ones, turn out to be engaging for stakeholders. The processes of crowd-sourcing and building open-script conversations allow stakeholders to decide the framework within which the dialogue takes place, such as by letting them choose the topic or moderate the discussion. The main difference between these two types of dialogue is that crowd-sourcing conversations happen thorough online platforms asynchronously, whereas open-script dialogues take place in videos and other formats that, rather than having a closed corporate script, give voice to third parties freely. Spaces also remain empty because, as many stakeholders stated, companies fail to address simple, concrete everyday problems that people face. Stakeholders need practical answers because CSR affects their lives, but companies seem to neglect this reality.

Our study starts to unpack the black box of dialogue by highlighting that there are three main dialogue spaces that corporations might promote to potentially obtain an open dialogue about CSR. In particular, we found that stakeholders privilege the first two types of spaces for deliberating with a corporation about CSR (i.e. spaces to co-learn and co-innovate), because they consider enacting real co-decision processes to be a utopian activity. Therefore, they question the authenticity of a company's efforts to establish online spaces to co-decide.

Our study also suggests that the mere creation of dialogue spaces is not sufficient to entice corporations to create a dialogue about CSR with stakeholders; rather, the

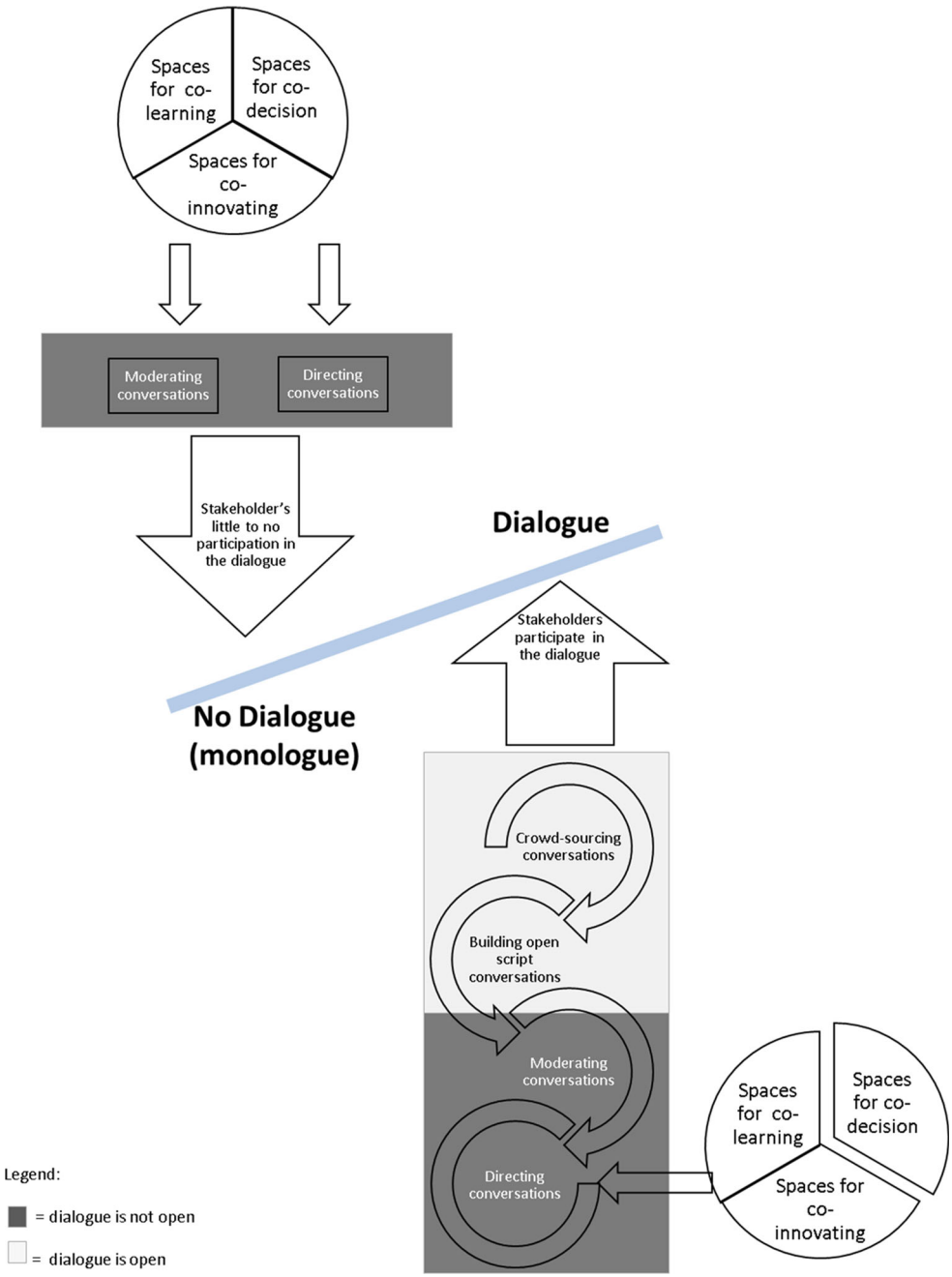

Fig. 5 Emerging theoretical model on dialogue about CSR

processes of dialogue that are initiated in these spaces matter. These spaces remain empty if corporations are not open to mixing four main dialogue processes: directing, moderating, crowd-sourcing, and building open-script dialogue. Previous studies (e.g. Etter et al. 2011; Fieseler and Fleck 2013) have already advanced the idea that corporations use deliberative spaces in the wrong way—not to deliberate but to inform. These studies have shown that corporations are missing a valuable opportunity to engage in conversations with civil society. As a result, external stakeholders still view corporations' CSR initiatives sceptically (Illia et al. 2013; Johansen and Ellerup Nielsen 2011; Scherer and Palazzo 2011). The present study proposes ideas regarding how corporations might use their own online spaces in a different way so as not to lose this opportunity.

These four processes of dialogue have not been previously discussed in the literature. However, we can link them to previous discussions about open versus closed dialogue (Mazutis and Slawinski 2008; Zoller 2004). Basically, our findings about these processes suggest that online corporate spaces that are typically owned might best be managed as

earned spaces (Lieb and Owyang 2012)—that is, as spaces that allow stakeholders to generate and cultivate their own user-generated content rather than merely to participate in a conversation that is moderated by the company. Only through such open dialogue processes will corporations be able to recognize what previous studies have called the dialogic and interactive nature of meaning-making that is essential to the CSR stakeholder engagement process (Crane and Livesey 2003). Moreover, only in this way will corporations be able to encourage what scholars have called the report of discrepancies between corporate statements and reality (Christensen and Cheney 2015).

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

As with all empirical studies, our research has limitations. First, as it is based on the qualitative exploration of corporations only in certain industries, our research needs replication to test the transferability of our findings. Our study was limited to dialogue spaces used by corporations of some specific industries; hence, we do not exclude the possibility that companies in other industries might initiate other type of dialogue spaces. It would be particularly interesting to explore the issues we investigated among other corporations from other business areas. In terms of the four processes of dialogue about CSR, it is reasonable to argue that these are not specific to the companies we explored, so our findings might well be transferable to corporations in other industries.

Another limitation of our study is that we focused on organizations that were well reputed for their CSR policies and that had resources to invest in promoting dialogue about CSR. In the future, it would be interesting to study medium-sized or small corporations that may have fewer resources and thus, potentially, different issues in engaging in open dialogue through online spaces.

Finally, we explored dialogue about CSR through a mixed-method qualitative content analysis of interviews—a methodology particularly suitable for theory building. Further exploration of the same issues could be performed using other methodologies to test the hypotheses.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore how corporations have included in their operations both instrumental and deliberative online spaces in their operations in order to have an open dialogue about CSR, as well as under what conditions such dialogue might actually take place. Our findings suggest that corporations have performed the first steps toward opening themselves to dialogue with external stakeholders; however, only few of them are ready to have open conversations on topics that stakeholders and civil society want to discuss. Corporations still privilege dialogue that is directed and moderated totally by themselves.

In proposing four different processes to converse about CSR, we suggest that the debate over dialogue in the area of CSR is only beginning. We hope that our findings encourage researchers to pursue a new line of research designed specifically to explore how deliberative and instrumental digital communication tools may change the way corporations interact with external stakeholders and civil society. In the current business climate, where trust is lacking, this may be more relevant than ever, because CSR is already a widely diffused practice, and corporations may need to seek better ways to show their real commitment to social issues. Much work remains to be done to help scholars catch up in this area. We fully expect that, if such research is conducted, a growing body of literature in CSR will complement and extend our findings, in addition to suggesting further questions for exploration and new avenues of enquiry for dialogue about CSR.

Acknowledgments Our research would not have been possible without the financial support provided by the International Association for Business Communicators. Also, we have greatly benefited from the conversations and suggestion of a number of peers or senior scholars. Comments by Stelios Zyglidopoulos (U of Glasgow), Dennis Schoeneborn (Copenhagen Business School), and Michael Etter (Copenhagen Business School) have been of incredible help and guidance while preparing this manuscript. We are also grateful to the participants at the CSR Communication conference at Aarhus School of Business whose comments about our initial ideas were very constructive and helpful in shaping this paper.

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