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**COMMUNICATING CSR –  
THE LASSWELL’S MODEL APPROACH\***

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**MODEL KOMUNIKACJI CSR  
W ŚWIETLE PODEJŚCIA H. LASSWELLA**

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**Summary:** For years Corporate Social Responsibility has been area of interest for both theorists and researchers. CSR is a rapidly developing business strategy and not simply a theory in the management literature. Different authors offer a multilevel and multidisciplinary theoretical framework and empirical research that analyse, synthesize and integrate the CSR area at the institutional, organizational, and individual levels of analysis. The author of the article tries to answer what are consumer needs as far as communicating the CSR activities is concerned. The Lasswell’s persuasion model was chosen as a background. The method used in the paper is analysis of existing research. It was purposeful selection of the sources of CSR research – fitting to the Lasswell’s model elements and tolerably recent time of publishing. This article is an attempt to gather outcomes from several studies and combine it into one compact theory that has features of integration (a primary attempt to something that may be carefully called meta-theory).

**Keywords:** CSR, communication, Lasswell’s model, customer.

**Streszczenie:** Przez lata zagadnienie Społecznej Odpowiedzialności Biznesu (CSR) było przedmiotem zainteresowań naukowych zarówno teoretyków, jak i praktyków, ponieważ jest ono gwałtownie rozwijającą się strategią biznesu, a nie tylko teorią w literaturze z zakresu zarządzania. Różni autorzy wypracowali różne, wielopoziomowe i interdyscyplinarne opracowania teoretyczne i badania praktyczne, które pozwalają analizować, syntetyzować i integrować obszar CSR na poziomach instytucjonalnym, organizacyjnym i indywidualnym. W tym artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, jakie są potrzeby komunikacyjne klienta otrzymującego przekaz o aktywności obejmującej społeczną odpowiedzialność firmy. Do tego celu jako podstawę wybrano model perswazyjny Lasswella. Zastosowano metodę analizy istniejących badań empirycznych – dobór celowy badań. Kryterium wyboru to dopasowanie do warunków narzuconych przez model Lasswella oraz możliwie niedawny czas publikacji badań naukowych. Opracowanie to jest pierwszą lub nawet pierwotną próbą stworzenia złożonej teorii komunikacji z klientem w zakresie CSR – tworzący, który można

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ostrożnie nazwać próbą stworzenia podwalin do metateorii noszącej cechy integracji dotychczasowych badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Społeczna Odpowiedzialność Biznesu (CSR), komunikacja, model Lasswella, klient.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays nobody argues with M. Friedman over the statement that “The only one responsibility of business towards the society is the maximization of profits to the shareholders, within the legal framework and the ethical custom of the country” [1970, p. 32, 33]. The social duty, according to Friedman, concerns only people, not corporations, which are responsible to shareholders, but certainly have no duty to the society as a whole. This neoliberal attitude is passé, because of inconsistency with business aims and goals of organizations, at least.

For years Corporate Social Responsibility has been an area of interest for both theorists and researchers, since about 70s of 20<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier (e.g. [Berle 1931; Bowen 1953; Carroll 1979; Clarkson 1995; Davis 1960; Dodd 1932; Donaldson, Preston 1995; Frederick 1960; Freeman 1984; McWilliams, Siegel 2001; McWilliams, Siegel, Wright 2006]). CSR is a rapidly developing business strategy and not simply a theory in the management literature [Williams, Aguilera 2008, p. 453]. Various authors offer a multilevel and multidisciplinary theoretical framework and empirical research that analyses, synthesizes and integrates the CSR area at the institutional, organizational, and individual levels of analysis. Moreover the field of empirical CSR research shows the lack of a consistent definition of the CSR construct, as well as its operationalization and measurement, as A. McWilliams, D. Siegel and P. Wright [2006], and P. Rodríguez, D. Siegel, A. Hillman and L. Eden [2006] pointed out. Above mentioned lack of consistency of CSR definitions across studies makes difficult to value and compare the different studies’ findings. The reason is various dimensions of CSR referred to in studies. Recent 15 years brought the increased and widespread interest in CSR [Serenko, Bontis 2009; Wagner, Lutz, Weitz 2009]. H. Aguinis and A. Glavas [2012] reviewed the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature on the basis of 588 works – 271 empirical and 305 conceptual journal articles and 102 books and book chapters. Moreover, 181 articles have been published in top-tier management journals and half of those were published since 2005.

To avoid confusion given the different conceptualizations available [Carroll 1999; McWilliams, Siegel, Wright 2006; Pelozo 2009; Rodríguez et al. 2006; Waddock 2003], the definition of CSR used in this paper is as follows: “context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders’ expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance” [Aguinis 2011, p. 855]. The reason for this definition choice is that it has already been adopted by others (e.g., [Rupp 2011; Rupp, Williams, Aguilera 2010]).

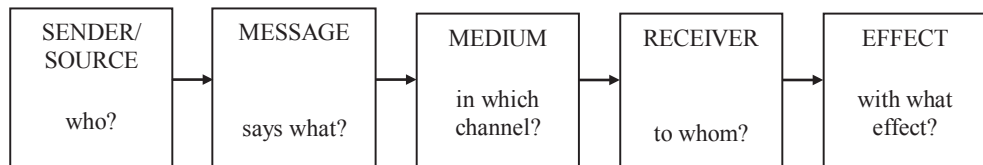
Lack of consistency in CSR concepts entails uncertainty in conducting process of communicating CSR activities. It is important who, apart from a company, is going to be a part of CSR process – customer, shareholder, employee, manager, owner, Ministry of Finance or even whole society. Each of them has different communication needs. Therefore the consistent CSR message should contain elements that answer all of those needs – from law compliance and economic correctness, via introduced ethical behaviour to expected philanthropy. All those issues, although very interesting, are impossible to be analysed in one article. This article tries to answer what are consumer needs as far as communicating the CSR activities process is concerned. The Lasswell’s persuasion model was chosen as a background and embedment for communication process, the range of reasons for the model choice is presented below.

The method used in the paper is the analysis of existing research. It was purposeful selection of the sources of CSR research – fitting the Lasswell’s model elements and tolerably recent time of publishing.

This approach is an attempt to bridge consumer communication needs and company boast necessity. Therefore the article should be treated as a voice in the CSR debate rather than recipe for success.

## 2. Implementing the Lasswell’s persuasion model

The Lasswell’s model is one of the classic communication approaches. It is one of the simplest, linear models of communication. The communication here is shown as message transmission. On the basis of this model there are numerous different interpretations, many modifications and various extensions. The construction of Lasswell’s model is based on Aristotle’s triad of communication – sender (orator/speaker), transfer (speech content) and receiver (listener). The author shaped the process as the five questions sequence. The formulated questions are the elements to analyse the communication process: who says? (control analysis), what says? (content analysis), by which channel? (media analysis), to whom he directs the message? (audience analysis), what is the effect of sent message? (effect analysis) [Lasswell 1973, p. 13] – see Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Lasswell’s model of persuasion

Source: [Lasswell 1973, p. 13].

In this model there is one-way transfer, the roles of process participants are clearly specified. The process itself is treated as persuasive one because the aim of the sender is to provoke specified result in the form of either strengthening or changing the existing attitude, or formation of a completely new receiver's attitude. This is especially needed in case of corporate social responsibility.

The emphasis is placed on the final effect of communication process – the change in receiver attitude and corresponding behaviour – not on the meaning issue. Change of any one of elements changes the effect of the communication – change of sending person (in CSR case – company itself or so called independent source), channel (directly or via electronic devices) and the message (brazen/self-interest or benevolence). Moreover there is lack of the feedback element (usually shown in models as an arrow directed backwards). Here in this model and in the case of CSR the feedback is not in the form of classic, verbal communicate, but it is shown as client behaviour. This range of reasons was the basis for the model choice.

### **3. Lasswell's model of CSR communication to customer**

The first element of the model is a sender as a source of information released, answering question "who". Research on the company's socially responsible activities has shown the importance of the information source for the customer. When a company supports a CSR activity that has high benefit salience, and consumers learn about the CSR activity through a neutral source, consumers are likely to maintain their existing evaluations of company. Consumers infer less sincere motives when they learn about CSR activities from a company source rather than a neutral source. In case of the company source consumers assume that CSR activities were motivated by image-promotional goals. The influence of information source on company evaluations is mediated by the inferred sincerity of motives [Charney, Blair 2015, p. 1417; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, Schwarz 2006, p. 380]. During the experiment, participants read brief information about the company (three different experiments: fictitious tobacco company, pharmaceutical company with its hair loss treatment in one experiment, and dental products, including teeth-whitening kits in the other). After reading the information about the company, participants in one group (the control group) were asked to evaluate the company or company's product at this point without further information. Participants in the second group (experimental group) received additional information regarding a CSR activity of the company, as well as the source of the CSR information – as given from company (recent company advertisement) or from independent source (e.g. UNICEF or a recent news story on the company by an independent news organization that monitors corporate behaviour). The results in all three experiments are similar. When customers learn about socially responsible activities from a company advertisement they more likely believe in self-interest motivation rather than benevolence. When they possess/gain information from independent source they emphasize the

company’s moral character. Worth pointing is fact that the result of increased trust happened in spite of the negative tobacco’s company reputation as well as largely untrustworthy categories such as hair restoration and teeth whitening.

The second element of the model is a message, answering question “what”. The CSR message should be about the social or ethical issue rather than about the company or its products, otherwise consumers suspect hidden motives [Friestad, Wright 1994]. Ignoring the research outcome companies usually concentrate on their involvement in CSR activities. In that case, they should emphasise their commitment to an activity, reason of engagement and their impact on that particular issue. Emphasising mentioned social or ethical issue company draws attention back from suspicious attitude to self-interest. The less the CSR activity is logically related to the core corporate activities, the lesser are concern and doubts about company’s motives [Menon, Kahn 2003]. But some authors think otherwise – they are for logical association of CSR activities and company’s performance [Cone 2007; Haley 1996]. The uncertainty arises around the receiver person – the first approach aims the message to the client, the second to the shareholders. This article concentrates on customer as a receiver of CSR message. Consumer belief in company’s competence and benevolence is higher when CSR information is rich rather than when it is scarce. R.M. Saat and M.H. Selamat [2014, p. 72] created two web sites of a fictional fast food restaurant with different levels of CSR information – they called it “lean website” and “rich website”. The lean website included details of nutritional values, halal products, food safety and food quality, that page was provided with text and still image only. The rich version included details of the same items but it was equipped with text, images, animation and video. One other website was a control one without the CSR disclosure. The results illustrate that consumers believe that the company has the necessary skills and ability to perform the services according to what they offer when the web page is reach. Demonstration of company expertise increases its competence in the eyes of its consumers. The finding also shows that to get consumers’ competence beliefs, the companies should use rich CSR presentation [Saat, Selamat 2014, p. 75].

The third element of the model is a medium understood as a channel of communication, answering question “which way”. There are a variety of communication channels a company itself can use to inform about own CSR activities. The internet itself creates a whole range of communication possibilities. Apart from internet it may be official documents (e.g. annual corporate responsibility report or press releases), official corporate website, TV commercials and traditional advertising channels, magazine or billboard advertisements or even product package. Corporate responsibility reporting became leading channel of communication: nearly 80% of the largest 250 companies worldwide issued corporate responsibility reports, up from about 50% in 2005 [KPMG 2008].

As described above in this paper, it is more efficient to inform about company’s CSR involvement via independent source – there is wide range of company-

uncontrolled and unrelated communication channels, e.g. media, customers, monitoring groups, consumer forums/blogs, independent TV programs, press).

The fourth element of the model is a receiver, answering question “to whom”. In this paper a customer has been chosen as a receiver, but it is wise to remember other stakeholders.

The last, fifth element of the model is a result, answering the question “with what effect”. When clients are told that company applies corporate social responsibility behaviour, they evaluate the product performance higher. In other words, knowing company’s socially responsible activities, a consumer’s perception of the functional performance of company products is more positive. A. Charnev and S. Blair found out that information about a company’s charitable donations influenced consumer taste perceptions, on the example of a wine-tasting experiment. Participants who were told that the winery donates a part of its revenues to charity rated the same wine as tasting better than participants who were not informed about this. Moreover, this effect is the function of expertise: it is stronger when consumers’ ability to evaluate performance based on a product’s intrinsic characteristics is low (novices – people who are less able to evaluate product performance) compared to when it is high (connoisseurs) [Charnev, Blair 2015, pp. 1415–1418].

Finally, client and other parties may have justified suspicions [Duhigg, Kocieniewski 2012] that the CSR performance is associated with corporate tax avoidance. The research of R. Lanis and G. Richardson [2015] shows that the higher is the level of CSR performance of a company, the lower is the likelihood of tax avoidance.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The whole range of miscellaneous research on CSR gives a broad spectrum of how interesting and difficult at the same time the CSR issue is. The separate topic is how to present the message of CSR activities. Although the presented research (and corresponding articles) required a lot of effort, theoretically prepared background, specially designed conditions but close to the “real world” at the same time, proper and deliberate methodology and measurements and carefully drawn conclusions, it is fragmentary at the same time. It covers one CSR issue at a time. From the point of view of communicating CSR activities the single research is fragmentary and diffused and this is a completely justifiable and reasonable approach.

This article is an attempt to gather outcomes from several studies and combine it into one compact theory that has features of integration (a primary attempt to something that may be carefully called meta-theory). The findings are gathered in Table 1. Of course the elements can be added, and the table above can be expanded. This primary approach should be a basis for further discussion.

**Table 1.** Communicating CSR to the customer – the perspective of Lasswell’s model

Lasswell’s model elements	CSR Lasswell’s model ingredients
Who	organization itself / neutral source (benevolence versus self-interest)
What	about issue not about company or its product level of CSR information: rich/lean/none
Which way	directly/internet/TV
Whom	to customer
What effect	client judge higher/lower their product considered unfairly as tax avoidance

Source: own research.

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