

# The Mass Mediation of Corporate Social Responsibility Discourse: An Anthropological Approach\*

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| 논문요약 |

미국 기업인들은 이제 기업에게 사회적 책임이 있다는 것을 당연시한다. 이 논문은 미국에서 기업의 사회적 책임(CSR)이 어떻게 하나의 공공영역 담론으로 부상했는지, 또 기업들에게 수용 가능한 담론이 될 수 있었는지를 알아본다. 여기서 CSR을 공공영역 담론으로 바라보고 그 전파 방식에 주목한다는 것은 CSR라는 하나의 언어토큰이 일상적으로 접할 수 있는 쓰인 담론(written discourse)에서 어떻게 사용되고 또 소통(특히 청자에게 이해되고 수용)될 수 있는가에 주목한다는 것이다. 이 논문은 우선 어떤 사회주체

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들이 어떠한 커뮤니케이션 채널들을 통해 CSR을 공공영역에서 이야기할 수 있는 주제로 고취시켰는가를 알아본다. 그 다음 CSR담론에서 대표적으로 사용되고 있는 수사학적 전략(rhetorical strategies)들을 도출해보고 그 실례들에 대한 참여 프레임웍(participant framework) 분석을 통해 기업들이 자발적으로 CSR담론을 수용하고 내재화할 수밖에 없는 이유를 알아본다. 기업에게 사회적 책임이 '있다'는 인식과 판단은 미국의 경우 21세기 초 기업단체들의 사회적 역할과 영향력에 대한 관심이 급증하며 급격히 확산되었다. 이 논문은 공공영역에서 일상적으로 다루는 CSR에 대한 논의가 기업들의 CSR실천으로 어떻게 이어질 수 있는가를 문화/언어인류학적으로 분석함으로써 CSR이 다른 사회(예: 한국)에서는 어떻게 확산될 수 있을지에 대한 시사점도 제공한다.

- 주제어: 기업의 사회적 책임, 자연발생적 담론, 대중매체, 메타담론, 참여 프레임웍

## I. Introduction

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a widespread participation by American corporate actors in the movement towards corporate social responsibility. How did corporate social responsibility (hereinafter, also referred to as “CSR”) emerge as a trend? Corporate social responsibility as a topic has been discussed widely and intensively in management and legal studies literatures. However, we have not yet seen much discussions emanating in the humanities or the social sciences, which explore its social and cultural aspects or significances from a non-business point of view. How do we understand the communicative process in which corporate actors come to recognize and interpret CSR as something relevant to business? What exactly triggers the emergence of CSR as a society-wide trend? Who are the actors that have mobilized the CSR phenomenon, and how are corporations being encouraged to take up CSR as an

everyday practice? Such questions that are essential to explaining the diffusion of CSR has not been adequately addressed, probably because the medium of language—including the effect language use can have—has been overlooked in most investigations of CSR.

Understanding that it is only through ‘talks about’ their social relationship and social roles that corporations can come to (be seen and judged to) ‘have’ responsibility, this paper analyzes corporate social responsibility as a discourse or more specifically, a “public sphere” discourse (Habermas 1999). Using theories and methods of cultural and linguistic anthropology, it explores how corporations come into contact with the idea that they have responsibilities to perform in relation to society, how CSR discourse is made relevant to corporations, and how corporations are encouraged to voluntarily consume CSR discourse and translate it into social action. Specifically, in order to do so, this paper adopts a “discourse-centered approach to culture” (Sherzer 1987; Urban 1991; Farnell and Graham 1998), which understands culture to be lodged in concrete observable signs—of which “CSR” is an example—and focuses on specific instances of token language use to systematically examine its use, its communicative power, and trace its spread.

How can a corporation—legally, a “fiction” and in reality, a group composed of multiple rather than single individuals bound by contract (Maine 1986)—come to realize itself as having responsibility? It is only through ‘talks’ about corporations as social actors with roles, statuses, and relationships that corporations can come to have and engage in social practices called responsibility. The goal of this paper is to then provide an analysis of how corporate social responsibility, as a linguistic token, came to be promoted as a topic of public sphere debate, and offer explanation as to how the rhetoric of CSR makes CSR a topic relevant to corporate actors.

This paper is structured as follows. First, after a brief introduction which discusses the empirical problems of studying and understanding corporate social responsibility, this paper explains how we can view CSR as a public sphere discourse. In the first section, the major players of the corporate social responsibility field are identified and what is examined is how these players produce and disseminate written CSR discourses so that it reaches corporations. In short, the objective of this section is to outline respectively the ‘sphere’ of CSR discourse circulation and the method by which CSR emerges as a topic worthy of ‘public’ debate. Then, after presenting an approach to CSR as a public sphere discourse, this paper moves on to address the question of how CSR comes to have relevance to corporations, how it can be construed as something that they must take up through corporate actions. In the second section, this paper identifies three major and commonly used rhetorical strategies used by different proponents of CSR; and distinguish how they differently attempt to (rhetorically) persuade, convert, and enroll corporations as participants in a movement towards CSR. In short, this section examines different methods by which corporations are enrolled into a “participant framework” in CSR written discourses (Goffman 1974; 1981). Using concrete examples, this section reveals how CSR proponents as ‘speakers’ frame their relationship to corporations, who may or may not be the ‘addresses’ of the written messages, while also frame their relationship to CSR and thereby position themselves as authorities who can guide, advise, or trigger corporate actions. In doing so, this section explains how different CSR proponents characterize CSR so that it comes to have actual relevance to those inside corporations. In the last section, summarizing findings discussed in the previous sections, this paper attempts to offer an analytic framework by which contemporary mass mediated phenomena (such as CSR) involving

language use can be systematically explained.

## II. The public sphere of CSR<sup>1)</sup>

In today's news reports, journal and magazine articles, books, websites, films, and various alternative media, a variety of terms are used indiscriminately and often interchangeably to refer to a type of corporate activity that yields some benefit to society. The term more broadly used in business communities is corporate social responsibility or CSR. However, what corporate social responsibility is can also be referred to as community relations or corporate citizenship. Below is a nonexhaustive list of related terms, either (a) mentioned in conjunction with CSR, or (b) seen as expressing similar objectives, or (c) considered equivalent to corporate social responsibility.

**Table 1. Registers of CSR**

Business citizenship	Corporate transparency
Business ethics	Environmental auditing
Business responsibility	Environmental sustainability
Community development	Global citizenship
Community engagement ("CE")	Global corporate citizenship
Community involvement	Global corporate social responsibility
Community relations	Organizational social responsibility
Corporate citizenship ("CC")	Social auditing
Corporate environmental responsibility	Social responsibility ("SR")
Corporate ethics	Socially responsible investing ("SRI")
Corporate giving	Stakeholder theory
Corporate philanthropy	Strategic corporate social responsibility

1) This paper is taken from a chapter of the author's doctoral dissertation (Koh 2010, 1-23). The author wishes to thank the three anonymous reviewers who provided observant and insightful feedbacks. Their feedbacks have hopefully helped to make this paper a more coherent 'whole.'

Corporate responsibility	Strategic philanthropy
Corporate social investment	Sustainability
Corporate sustainability	Sustainable development

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of corporate social responsibility (Carroll 1991; Jones 1999; The World Bank n.d.).<sup>2)</sup> It is “an umbrella concept,” as noted in a U.S. Government Accountability Office report (2005a, 5). However, there are rules that govern what actions are called corporate social responsibility. According to the same report:

The term “CSR” is an umbrella concept with many different definitions. However, most definitions suggest that, in addition to addressing the interests of its shareholders, business should address the interests of its other stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, and the local community. CSR definitions cover a broad range of potential social concerns, including business ethics, community development, labor, environment, and human rights (Government Accountability Office 2005a, 5).

In short, it is corporate activities undertaken not to fulfill self-interest or fiduciary duties that corporate social responsibility references. The ‘social’ in CSR distinguishes such acts from those motivated out of self-interest and ‘responsibility’ from ones acted out of legal obligation.<sup>3)</sup> Hence, corporate contributions to a corporate

2) Literature discussing the definition of corporate social responsibility often comments on how there is no universally accepted definition of the term. This is also the case with other CSR terminology used for more professionalized and established areas of corporate practice.

3) It has been noted that the ‘social’ in the phrase corporate social responsibility varies by culture. In France, it is more narrowly defined as issues concerning employees, wages, and working conditions (Bardelli and Pastore 2006). A report by the Council for Better Corporate Citizenship notes that in Japan, CSR “began with

executive's favorite charity, for example, or things done so that certain environmental regulations are met, do not count as CSR (Chandler 2005). The expectation is that whatever actions taken are voluntary and in the interests of stakeholders<sup>4</sup>—or groups that have some stake in the actions or inactions of companies, such as employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, vendors, and the environment.

What we are observing with different terminologies being used to refer to a type of such corporate actions (in Table 1) is an expansion of corporate social responsibility registers. A register is “a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices,” and its use “conveys to a member of the culture that some typifiable social practice is linked indexically to the current occasion of language use” (Agha 2006, 216). This, in turn, has generated confusion as to what exactly is performed under the rubric of CSR and hence subsequent requests among corporate insiders for some standards and

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environmental efforts, but today it has expanded to include human rights, fair labor standards, consumer protection, and health and safety issues” (2002, 6). A report by IISD states that in India and South Africa, CSR “has suffered criticism on the grounds that it exaggerates the business sector’s ‘responsibility’ for society’s problems,” and that in South Africa this is due to allegations of businesses as being responsible for the injustices of apartheid (International Institute for Sustainable Development et al. 2004).

- 4) ‘Stakeholder’ is a key concept in definitions of corporate social responsibility. In fact, it is this concept that allows corporate social responsibility to be distinguished from the traditional notion that companies need only recognize their fiduciary duties. Using the stakeholder concept, CSR discourse offers a new ‘role’ for corporations, attempting to pose an alternative to the traditional ownership-based, economic view of a firm. An study that reviews the evolution of the stakeholder concept in detail claims that the first instance of the term can be traced to 1963, when it was “coined in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute” (Freeman and Reed 1983). However, Valor (2005) writes that it was coined in the 1980s, even though the Stanford Research Institute International’s memorandum was the earliest reference.

standardizations at regulating institution's level. In fact, this confusion was observed firsthand in the work of corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship consultants, generally looked upon as experts in the field: Questions such as “how are community relations and corporate sustainability different” or “is corporate citizenship synonymous with corporate social responsibility” were questions asked and provisionally answered.

Who, then, allowed this expansion of CSR registers? What this brief survey of CSR-themed phrases suggest is that CSR is something that multiple, countless, individual speakers are talking about and can discuss, in spite of a lack of clear definition and in relation to a normative stance towards how corporations should act. This sheer fact makes it necessary to investigate how CSR has become a topic of public debate, or how it acquired its ‘public’ characteristics.

## 1. Rise of ‘modern’ CSR

Unlike European countries such as France, Germany, and the U.K., the government of the United States has not been active in what is sometimes called a “(social) movement” towards corporate social responsibility (Waddock 2008; King 2008). There are no laws dedicated to it, and according to a survey of federal activities, more than 75 percent of approximately fifty so-called CSR programs, policies, and activities are non-mandating (Government Accountability Office 2005c). U.S. corporate behavior was rather overseen by means of regulation—designed to satisfy specific monitoring needs of the state and, accordingly, have been limited in scope.<sup>5)</sup>

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5) Starting in the 1960s, agencies such as OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration), EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) and the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) were set up.



Then what explains the CSR phenomenon in the U.S.? The first corporations to engage in corporate social responsibility were large multinational companies.<sup>6)</sup> But a recent survey shows that there is “a strong signal that corporate social responsibility has earned a place alongside the bottomline,” with the majority of executives surveyed (from nearly 800 companies of all sizes) agreeing with the statement that “businesses should do more to tackle social problems” (Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship 2009, 20). Other reports likewise show that senior executives in the U.S. and abroad, and in corporations of all sizes, recognize the need to contribute to fostering the public good (EnviroNics International 1999; The McKinsey Quarterly 2006).

There are different views as to when modern CSR began. In an article tracing the evolution of the CSR construct, Carroll (1999, 270) writes that the modern era started around the 1950s with the publication of *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (1953) by Bowen, the “Father of Corporate Social Responsibility.”<sup>7)</sup> However, more scholars point to the late 1960s and the 1970s, when

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6) For example, British Petroleum (BP) was prior to the gulf oil spill widely recognized as “a leader in the development and implementation of a comprehensive CSR strategy,” with a focus on environmental and human rights and a “strong public stance on the issue of transparency” (Business for Social Responsibility 2003a). The company first began publishing its annual Environmental and Social Report in 1998. Starbucks Coffee Co., is also widely recognized as committed to “numerous stakeholders including coffee growers, the environment, employees, and communities.” In 1997 the company formed a partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund division to develop “environmentally preferable disposable coffee cups and promote increased use of reusable cups, and also supported conservation program that encourages sustainable agricultural practices since 1998 (Business for Social Responsibility 2003b).

7) Carroll also notes however that it was in the late 1960s and the 1970s that definitions of CSR proliferated and research into the relationship between CSR and corporate social performance (CSP) began (1999).

anti-corporate sentiment was widespread and there was a momentum for the institutionalization of CSR. This came at a time when many realized that the “social expectations of business had outstripped” the businesses’ capabilities (Wood 1991, 383).

During the late 1960s to 1970s, corporations and large multinational companies in particular were blamed for the increasing U.S. unemployment rate. Additional concerns were raised about consumer and worker safety issues and environmental degradations brought about by corporate operations (Epstein 1998; Carroll 1999). There was “a burst of [mass media] coverage...with stories focusing on consumer advocate Ralph Nader, pollution, and shareholder actions surrounding CSR debates” (Hamilton 2003, 3).<sup>8)</sup> According to Waddock (2004), a milieu for a “wave” of institutional support was created, with business associations and citizen alliance groups focused on issues concerning sustainability, responsibility, and accountability. Then, definitions of corporate social responsibility began incorporating “ideas of neighborliness and using language that become the basis for stakeholder theory” (Bateman 2003). Adam Smith’s “enlightened self-interest” concept started being used to challenge the traditional shareholder theory of the firm (Smith 1976).

Figure 1 was generated based on a count of all the articles in *LexisNexis Academic’s* U.S. newspapers and news wires that contain the phrase “corporate social responsibility.”<sup>9)</sup> Data is limited to

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8) Hamilton also notes that there were few articles in *The New York Times* containing the token, “corporate social responsibility,” between 1900 and the 1960s (2003, 3).

9) Data is limited to digital archives, which were full-texts of over 350 newspapers and the archives of *Financial Times* (dating back to 1982), *The New York Times* (dating back to 1980), and *The Washington Post* (dating back to 1977). While also within the limit of accessible content, a search in Google News Archive shows a similar looking curve. Both searches were done in February 2010. See also a count of the number of articles in *Financial Times* between 1984-2003 by Buhr (2007), a

digitized archives, but the figure is consistent with reports that the term was picked up sometime during the 1970s in mass media coverage of major corporate wrongdoings (for example, corruption, tax evasions, and corporate involvement in clandestine political activities<sup>10</sup>).

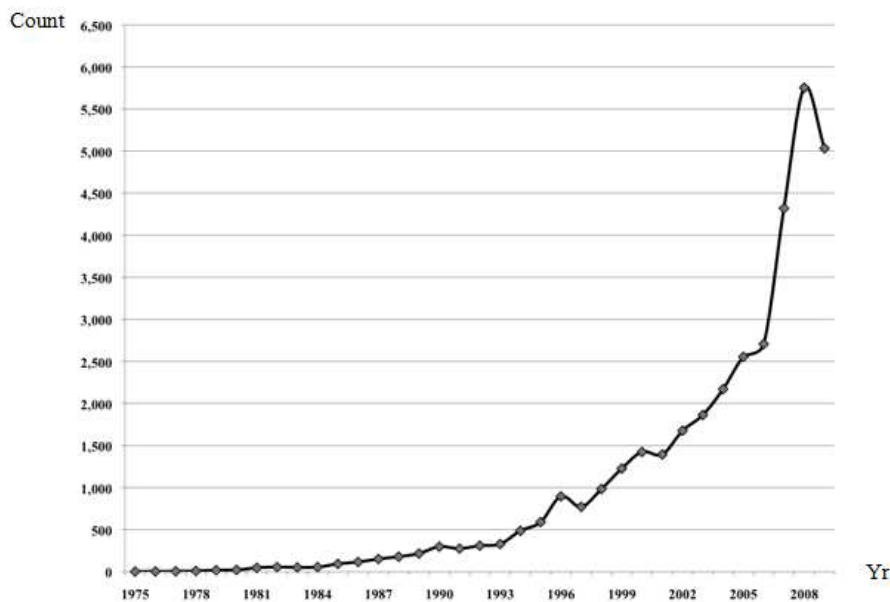


Figure 1. Number of articles in U.S. newspapers and wires from 1975 to 2009 containing "corporate social responsibility"

In the 1990s, the "big media story was anti-globalization," environmental change, and genetically modified food (SustainAbility,

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study which shows a sudden peak after the Enron scandal around 2002.  
 10) Specifically, there was a corporate scandal involving the International Telegraph and Telephone Company (ITT) and the U.S. CIA's attempt to thwart accession of the Allende government in Chile, which led to "nearly 500 of America's top corporations [being] drawn into disclosures of improper payments" (Kline 1985).

Ketchum, and UNEP 2002), and there was an “explosion” of interest in corporate social responsibility on a worldwide scale (Lydenberg 2005). Professional societies and organizations such as International Association of Business and Society (1990) and Business for Social Responsibility (1992) emerged. The professionalization of CSR had begun. There were more publications discussing the relationship of corporate social responsibility to corporate performance; and in the U.S., politicians began to mention corporate social responsibility in their speeches. In addition, *Model Business Principles* (1995), a code of business ethics, was issued by the Clinton Administration. Previously, corporate social responsibility had been primarily a discourse of corporate morals, but “alternative themes such as stakeholder theory, business ethics theory, CSP and corporate citizenship” were now included in discussions of corporate social responsibility (Carroll 1999, 292). It was only in the 1990s that CSR had finally begun to appear less of an “oxymoron” (Lydenberg 2005, ix).

As Rowe (2005, 132) writes, it was “at times when corporations and the institutional structures that supported them became subject to intense public scrutiny” that CSR discourses and practices flourished. The major accounting scandals of Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom of the early 2000s indeed “marked a watershed in the discussion of CSR” (Buhr and Grafström 2007, 26). These scandals, which shook public faith and investor confidence in the U.S. securities market, opened a so-called post-Enron world where individual corporate behaviors and actions came to have effects on the entire corporate sector (and not merely on the reputations of individual companies). The *Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002*,<sup>11)</sup> enacted as a response to the scandals

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11) The legislation was also called the “Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act” (in the Senate), “Corporate and Auditing Accountability and Responsibility Act” (in the House), and

and affecting all publicly held companies, was a landmark event that legitimized demands for transparency and accountability in financial reporting (Stelzer 2004). In the meantime, CSR became a rubric covering a wide variety of issues that have potentially broader social impacts (e.g., corporate governance, corporate accountability and transparency).

## 2. Institutional actors and mass mediation

Practitioners have credited private sector and civil society actors for the spread of corporate social responsibility in the U.S. (Kenan Institute Study Group 2003; Bertelsmann Stiftung and Gtz 2007). General public awareness, more accurately though, increased because of the work of organizational and institutional actors. By one count there are “more than 2700 organizations working on all aspects of corporate social responsibility in more than 105 countries” (Directory, Corporate Social Responsibility Newswire, accessed January 31, 2010). A sample list of entities working on various CSR issues includes the following (with those viewed as the ‘CSR definers’ in italics):<sup>12)</sup>

- Social Science Research Network (Academic)
- AccountAbility, Business in the Community, Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy, World Business Council for Sustainable Development (Corporate leadership

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more commonly, “Sarbanes - Oxley,” or “SOX.” The Sarbanes-Oxley made disclosure of certain information (e.g., executive compensation and insider trading) mandatory for all publicly held companies. However, because of the focus on financial reporting (rather than CSR reporting), it is not recognized as a CSR law in the professional communities.

12) Organizations working on various aspects of CSR have been variously categorized and listed much more comprehensively elsewhere (See Leipziger 2003; Blowfield and Murray 2008; Visser et al. 2007).

organizations)

- British Petroleum, The Body Shop, Pfizer (Corporations)
- Business for Social Responsibility, International Business Leaders Forum (CSR dissemination and counseling)
- Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, Center for Business Ethics at Bentley College, Conference Board, Aspen Institute, Transparency International, SustainAbility (CSR knowledge centers or think tanks)
- CSR Newswire, Ethical Corporation (CSR information centers)
- Bertelsmann Foundation (Foundations)
- British Department for Trade and Industry, European Commission (Governmental orgs, mostly European countries)
- Social Accountability International (Nongovernmental orgs)
- World Economic Forum (Independent orgs)
- FSG Social Impact Advisors (Nonprofit orgs)
- GlobeScan's CSR Monitor, Social Investment Forum, Transparency International (Monitoring organizations)
- Business Ethics Network, Global Reporting Initiative, NetImpact, The Future 500 (Stakeholder networks)

Whether responsively or obligatorily, non-state multilateral organizations, some European governmental entities, and multinational business associations have taken up corporate social responsibility as a programmatic activity and have issued major CSR so-called “codes,” “principles,” or “guidelines.” This has been described as a “competition for rule-making authority” among non-state actors (Wood 2006). Others organizations have been creating, documenting, or assembling information; creating conferences, training programs, networking events for businesses; circulating electronic newsletters, white papers, reports, and so forth; providing professional expertise (such as counseling); organizing public events or initiatives; et cetera.

Despite the differences in their work, CSR is an organizational activity and also a product, prominently displayed (often advertised) for public notices, and often offered on the basis of organizational membership or fees. For corporations, association with these entities through membership itself is of value as the listing of their names on the websites or PR materials can work to show that they are ‘members’ of the advocated cause or ‘co-advocates’ of corporate social responsibility.

Table 2 lists examples of the CSR work produced and reproduced by organizational actors in the form of print and electronic media. The table also lists how these works are made viewable by a wide variety of social actors. And it shows for whom different works would be of particular interest: corporations, state and civil society actors, academic communities, and corporate stakeholder communities.

**Table 2. Channeling CSR discourse:  
From producers to target audiences**

Producers	Product	Channel	Target Audiences
Governmental orgs	→ Regulations	:	← Businesses
Multilateral orgs	→ Policies; guidelines	:	← States; businesses
Business associations	→ Guidelines; leadership	:	← Businesses
Academia	→ Textbooks; articles	:	← Scholars; students
CSR orgs	→ Consultancy; research	:	← CSR professionals
Media orgs	→ News; journals; video	:	← Onlookers
Stakeholder groups	→ Reports; website narratives	:	← Interested public
Businesses	→ Annual reports; PR	:	← Stakeholders

In their article on “mass media,” Lazarsfeld and Merton (2000, 20) wrote that it is a function of mass media to put forth an issue for public notice and to help “confer status” on it as a public issue. Organizational actors in general enjoy privileged access to media, but

those devoted to disseminating CSR have helped to create a trend, by ‘channeling’ and making accessible CSR products of interest to groups of social actors who have the potential of influencing corporate behavior.

This is the pattern in which CSR written discourses are becoming familiar to corporate actors. Major institutions as organizational actors have, in the early twenty-first century, been simultaneously partaking in the mass production of CSR written discourses; and they have been using media that reaches the mass (i.e., forming the so-called sphere of CSR discourse circulation and aiming for mass mediation) while promoting it as a topic worthy of public debate. Meanwhile, in doing so, these discourses have been enrolling corporations and corporate stakeholder groups as parties to whom the contents of the talk are addressed or of relevance.

### **III. Enrolling participants: The rhetoric of CSR**

Corporate social responsibility ‘poses’ corporate entities as social actors and not legal fictions—bound are they in social relations and social responsibilities to surrounding communities. This is what makes for the association with the stakeholder view of the firm and helps bring about a disassociation with the longheld and dominant view that focuses on shareholders. The proponents of corporate social responsibility argue that the nature of the corporation has been wrongly conceptualized; that corporations ‘have’ a role in caring for the interests of various stakeholders who—though they may have no formal, contractual, relationship with the company—support, allow, and



enable businesses to operate and are affected by their operations in turn.

There are rhetorical strategies commonly used by so-called advocates of corporate social responsibility—using a term for persons and entities engaged in the construction of messages about certain controversial issues—to make a case for CSR and to make their messages heard. The concept of “participation framework,” initially proposed by Goffman (1974, 1981) and later developed into “participant framework” in linguistic anthropology (Goodwin 1990), is useful to examine these strategies. Although it has been mostly examined in the context of verbal communication, participant framework can be used to study nonverbal, non face-to-face, and text-mediated interactions, which occur on a “displaced time” basis (Goffman 1974; Schieffelin 1994, 1995). According to Goffman, “when a word is spoken, all of those who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it” (1981, 3). As in everyday speech, the authors of CSR print discourses use language to speak to another, about another, and also to position themselves with respect to another, *vis-à-vis* the other, as well as to written content.

Viewing a speaker-hearer dyad as reductive, Goffman introduced concepts of (1) production format and (2) participation framework. Production format decomposes speaker roles into: (1.1) animator, the articulator of words; (1.2) author, the person selecting the words; and (1.3) principal, those whose views and/or positions are expressed. Participant framework includes hearer roles of: (2.1) ratified participant, who may be (2.1.1) addressed recipient, or (2.1.2) unaddressed recipient; and (2.2) unratified participant, who is a (2.2.1) bystander, having some aural/visual access: (2.2.2) overhearer, unintentionally and inadvertently listening, or (2.2.3) eavesdropper, intentionally and selectively listening in on the conversation.

Using these concepts made available by Goffman, here, this paper identifies three most prominently used rhetorical strategies to make CSR discourse relevant to corporate actors and to enroll them as participants in the movement towards CSR.<sup>13)</sup> Specifically, these strategies are separable largely depending on ‘who’ the producers of discourse are: namely, those that (1) occupy the role of so-called ‘officials,’ such as regulating bodies and governmental organizations, in the governance of corporate actions; (2) are ‘experts’ in relation to corporations such as business consultants, and; (3) are general ‘community stakeholders.’ Taking one exemplary case from each of these categories of CSR discourse production (i.e., by so-called ‘officials,’ ‘experts,’ and ‘community stakeholders’), the following subsections analyze how corporations are framed as (potential) recipients of CSR messages and how CSR is made a relevant topic to businesses. In short, the following sections hope to draw out how CSR written discourses produced by different social institutions call upon corporations as addressees of the discourse, and how corporations are framed as social actors who can participate in the public sphere discourse of CSR through their actions.

## 1. Stating CSR as worldwide expectation

Written in the style of administrative or legal writing, CSR standards, regulations, or guidelines produced by governing institutions and bodies are more likely than others to call upon companies

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13) These three rhetorical strategies have been identified based on two years of review of secondary resources on CSR (that is, written CSR discourses provided in newspaper articles, magazine articles, and CSR websites) as most widely, frequently, and prominently used strategies. Not all rhetorical strategies fall under these categories. However, most CSR discourses the author has encountered appear to be using one of these strategies to package and persuade CSR to companies.

rhetorically as the addressees of their discourses. For example, the UN Global Compact introduces the *Ten Principles* with the sentence below:

- 1 The Global Compact asks companies to embrace, support and enact,
- 2 within their sphere of influence, a set of core values in the areas of
- 3 human rights, labour standards, the environment, and anti-corruption.

The sentence allows the readers to understand that the text, *Ten Principles* (a “business framework”), is written for certain audiences working in the business community (i.e., “companies,” which in the case of U.S. includes sole proprietorships, general and limited partnerships, limited liability companies, and corporations). It also indicates that the authors (“The Global Compact”) request voluntary engagements (use of the verb “asks”) of companies, to further their values outlined in the *Ten Principles* (UN Global Compact Office 2000).

- 4 Human Rights
- 5 • Principle 1: *Businesses should* support and respect the
- 6 protection of internationally proclaimed human rights; and
- 7 • Principle 2: make sure that they are not complicit in human
- 8 rights abuses.
- 9 Labour Standards
- 10 • Principle 3: *Businesses should* uphold the freedom of
- 11 association and the effective recognition of the right to
- collective bargaining;
- 12 • Principle 4: the elimination of all forms of forced and

- compulsory labour;
- 13 • Principle 5: the effective abolition of child labour; and
- 14 • Principle 6: the elimination of discrimination in respect of
- 15 employment and occupation.
- 16 Environment
- 17 • Principle 7: *Businesses should* support a precautionary
- 18 approach to environmental challenges;
- 19 • Principle 8: undertake initiatives to promote greater
- 20 environmental responsibility; and
- 21 • Principle 9: encourage the development and diffusion of
- 22 environmentally friendly technologies.
- 23 Anti-Corruption
- 24 • Principle 10: *Businesses should* work against corruption in
- 25 all its forms, including extortion and bribery. (UN Global  
Compact Office 2000; *emphasis added*)

Although it is not a regulatory instrument that “polices” (UN Global Compact Office 2000), the use of the verb “should” makes it appear as though the embracement or the enactment of values of human rights, environmentalism, and anti-corruption are ideal behaviors and, to a certain extent, obligatory of companies (Palmer 2001; Austin 1962). Elsewhere, it is stated that such values are those that “enjoy universal consensus” (UN Global Compact Office 2000).

A relationship between the authors, general public, and companies is ‘framed’ as that between those who can ‘declare’ what the universally held expectations toward companies are and those to whom the contents are intended (the “addressed recipients” in Goffman’s terms). What exactly is being asked of companies (line 1) is in fact that they become “signatories” (UN Global Compact Office 2000). To become a “signatory” then would imply that companies defer to the authority of the UN Global Compact on the one hand and, on the other hand, that

they align with those whose views are represented as well as declared in the *Ten Principles*.

CSR discourses produced by governmental institutions largely follow this pattern of framing the relationship between the producer and the corporation as that of declarer of what is a public expectation and receiver of such statement.

## 2. CSR as enlightened self-interest

Meanwhile, in materials published by CSR knowledge centers and experts (such as CSR whitepapers, articles, newsletters) companies are usually not directly called upon, asked or told. Instead it is 'suggested' that they take into account knowledge or information that is of practical use to them. Like media advisories, the texts alert, warn, or awaken readers to unknown but objective facts; and the main character that distinguishes them from other sets of CSR written texts (specifically, public sector organizations and civil society groups or entities) is that they take on the perspective of corporate readership. In line with the goals of many of these organizations offering CSR expertise to 'help.'<sup>14)</sup>

Around the mid-2000s, there was much emphasis on how the integration of CSR into business is a 'smart' move. Viewing CSR as a demonstration of enlightened self-interest (Smith 1976), numerous publications sought to explain how it aligns—or made to align with—the business goal of profit making (Keim 1978). These CSR

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14) Countless codes of conduct, in-house and third-party monitoring organizations, and auditing devices have been developed, and a great deal of CSR-related information is circulating through conferences, training programs, newsletters, and research papers, many of which are products and services of CSR information or knowledge organizations, or companies.

discourses, using a style of language that is familiar to corporate audiences, lay out information that quantitatively evidences how, what, and/or why CSR positively impacts businesses. Further, they portray CSR as something increasingly inevitable.<sup>15)</sup> For instance:

Improvement of financial performance:

- 1 While it remains difficult to determine a direct causal relationship between increased accountability and financial performance, a variety of studies suggest such a link exists.
- 2 For example, according to the 2002 Global Investor Opinion Survey released by McKinsey & Company, a majority of investors are prepared to pay a premium for companies exhibiting high governance standards. Premiums averaged 12-14 percent in North America and Western Europe; 20-25 percent in Asia and Latin America; and over 30 percent in Eastern Europe and Africa.
- 3 The study also found that *more than 60 percent of investors state that governance considerations might lead them to avoid individual companies with poor governance.*
- 4 In addition, a 1997 study by Wilshire Associates, a financial information and consulting firm for institutional investors, revealed that *the stock prices of financially under-performing companies improved after implementing corporate governance reforms.*
- 5 A 1997 study on board independence by academics Ira M.

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15) The titles of texts alone reveal how a major shift has occurred in the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility. For instance, see titles: *Enviropreneurial marketing strategy: The emergence of corporate environmentalism as market strategy* (Menon and Menon 1997), *The link between corporate social responsibility and strategic management* (Jastram 2007), *The business case for corporate social responsibility* (Kurucz, Colbert, and Wheeler 2008).

Millstein and Paul W. MacAvoy found “a substantial and significant correlation between active independent boards superior corporate performance.” (Business for Social Responsibility 2003a, *emphasis added*)

The five-sentence paragraph above, taken from a report of a highly reputable CSR nonprofit organization, explains one (of overall, ten) reason why companies should respond to public demands for corporate accountability, a register of CSR as pointed out previously. The argument that attention to accountability may lead to increased financial performance (line 1) is supported through summaries taken from three surveys (lines 2–5).

Empirical evidence used as examples or in-text citations from secondary resources are key features noted in the texts produced by knowledge centers and experts: These features demonstrate the research capacity and the ability to re-contextualize pertinent information. Experts and CSR knowledge producers thus function as clearinghouses that facilitate transmission of practical input. Employing these techniques, what is conveyed overall is a sense that a large number of investors and companies see a correlation between practices of corporate accountability and business performance (even if it may be an indirect one); that more and more companies are taking this seriously; and that ignoring public demands or expectations may be damaging not only in terms of reputation but also in terms of finances.

### 3. CSR as a quality of personhood

Of the various categories of social actors discussing corporate activities, community stakeholders are perhaps most effective (and also

direct) in alarming corporations over the importance of social responsibility. This is because commentaries, emanating from countless groups who constitute corporate stakeholders, are typically made with a firm belief that corporations function in relation to, and as a part of, the larger society. Whereas public sector organizations and professional CSR entities have recently become major players in the promotion of corporate social responsibility, various groups and individuals representing those groups (e.g., employees, shareholders, customers, investors, et cetera) have allowed public attention to be kept on corporations.

From the view of the corporation, stakeholder commentaries can matter, in short, because they create a stereotype that negatively affects its image the further the comments travel. Generally speaking, stakeholder comments are ‘not spoken to’ corporations, but similar to gossip about an individual: They are either entirely dismissive of the company subjected to the talk or are alienating. In other words, if a text that criticizes a company is addressed to “the public” as its canonical audience (Warner 2002), the company targeted is often one not a part of that public by virtue of being picked out.

- 1 For all the feel good rhetoric that [President & CEO's name] and [Names of a corporation and its subsidiary] put into the very expensive, glossy, insert in [Newspaper name, date], wouldn't it have been much more appropriate and beneficial to our island to at least print on recycled/recyclable paper with biodegradable ink?
- 2 I also couldn't find a recycling center in the plans for the new community.
- 3 Let's try to keep recycling in mind when we are in community planning mode.
- 4 Builders and developers too should be required to do their part.



[Name, title, name of organization, location]

For example, this op-ed piece published in a local newspaper looks at a specific case (i.e., the choice of paper used for a newspaper insert) to make claims about corporate environmental responsibility. The head of a recycling group, the author, makes an appeal to environmentally conscious readers' common sense ("wouldn't it have been," line 1); and the writer suggests that the corporation has responsibilities "too" as a part of "us" to be mindful of, and engage in, environmentally friendly practices (lines 3-4). The polarizing effect often found in activist press releases, websites, protest paraphernalia, and popular news media reports is accomplished through such a juxtaposition of "the company versus us."

The company commented on in this example is a company that was in the process of launching a new effort, "the new community" (line 2). It was a community development project and one that needed county and state approvals or permissions. The ramification for the company was that it 'had to' respond to such a comment publicly, whether in the form of press release or executive replies at public hearings or gatherings, in order to obtain community approvals for business projects. In other words, such mundane commentaries emanating from community members directly impacted corporations. Such comments had to be answered, addressed, and they had to be internalized inside corporations in order to prevent further such commentaries from other community members. For in American English, the word corporation, a collective noun, takes a singular verb and thus the collectivity is often posited as accountable for the wrongdoings of a single individual, department, or event. Single criticisms are hence damaging for they, again like gossip, can disseminate negative tales of the qualities of corporate personhood. Along with CSR reports, many large corporations have also been

issuing corporate environmental responsibility reports. Such activities are attempts to respond to, silence, or counter the critical remarks that (may) circulate and are corporations' mode of speaking through representatives and representative materials.

In sum, these are the three most typically-used strategies by which CSR discourse producers attempt to make CSR relevant to corporate actors. Corporations are being called upon rhetorically to 'rise' and meet global standards because CSR is now a worldwide expectation. They are also being taught, by business experts, that CSR is now an inevitable move for companies that hope to continue profit-making. And lastly, they are also being told that their activities are under scrutiny and reflect qualities of corporate personhood. It is under such constraints, conveyed via discourses that frame the relationship between corporations and society, that contemporary English-speaking (and particularly, American) corporations have and are coming to take up CSR in their everyday activities.

#### IV. Conclusion: Discourse to action

Within the last decade, there has been a "movement" towards corporate social responsibility (Waddock 2008). How is corporate social responsibility relevant to corporations that are profit 'making' rather than 'sharing' (Koh 2010)? And how has it been constructed as a topic of public sphere debate? These are the questions this paper asked, which depicted CSR as a mass mediating discourse circulating in the public sphere. With an understanding that it is only through talks about their social roles and social relationships that companies can come to have responsibility, this paper took a cultural/linguistic anthropological "discourse-centered approach" to corporate social

responsibility, tracing the use of the token word 'CSR' to understand its diffusion—(a) identifying who the primary producers of CSR discourses are, (b) examining how these producers utilize media in order to reach audiences, and (c) analyzing how CSR written discourses made easily accessible to corporate actors frame the relationship between discourse producers (as speakers) and corporations (as addressees) as well as package CSR as something 'relevant' to corporations so as to make CSR 'heard' or 'received.'

The approach taken in this paper shows that the Goffman's concept of participant framework is useful to understand the dialogic emergence of not only culture but also a sociological phenomenon such as corporate social responsibility. By viewing emergence of a trend as in essence mediated by language use, we can trace how language is used in order to put forth an issue to public debate, how individuals or entities are enrolled into a framework in relation to other individuals or entities, and how discourse can lead to social action (if indeed it is taken up as activity). This paper has focused on the diffusion and the mass mediation of CSR in the U.S., but such a study can be replicated in other social contexts as well. For instance, if this study was to be replicated in the context of South Korea; (a) what are the terms used to refer to CSR?, (b) who are the major organizational actors producing CSR discourses?, (c) how are major CSR discourse producers utilizing mass media so as to reach corporations as discourse addressees?, and (d) what are the rhetorical strategies that—in effect—frame the discourse producer as the 'authority' or the 'expert,' the corporations as discourse 'addressees' or 'recipients,' and the content 'CSR' as something corporations 'must' take up in everyday practice? By answering these questions, exactly how CSR comes to have relevance for certain companies may be addressed.

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ABSTRACT

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## **The Mass Mediation of Corporate Social Responsibility Discourse: An Anthropological Approach**

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This paper approaches corporate social responsibility as a discourse and explores how as public sphere discourse CSR has become a trend among American corporations. It questions how corporate social responsibility has been promoted as a topic worthy of public debate and how it is made into something that companies should respond to. To attend to these questions in a cultural and linguistic anthropological fashion is to attend to the way CSR as discourse involves social actors who in their everyday work and interactions use speech—and in this case, writing—to engage in socially meaningful actions with one another. How can corporations come to ‘have’ responsibilities and perform responsible actions as ‘single’ entities? It is only through talks about the social relationships and roles of corporations that such framing is possible. By examining who the major actors are in the promotion of CSR as a public sphere discourse and revealing the method by which their discussions about the relationship between corporations and society are made relevant to corporate actors, this paper hopes to provide an understanding as to how corporate social responsibility has emerged as a sociological phenomenon in the United States of America (and possibly abroad).

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Key words: Corporate Social Responsibility, Naturally Occurring  
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Framework