

*Guest Editors' Introduction*

The Challenges and Prospects  
of Deliberative Democracy for Corporate  
Sustainability and Responsibility

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This introduction argues that the use of the concept of deliberative democracy in corporate social responsibility (CSR) research needs to be theoretically extended. We review three developments that have recently occurred in deliberative democracy theory within political science and philosophy: 1) the conceptualization of deliberative systems (macro level), 2) the considerations of mini-publics (micro level), and 3) the role of online deliberation. We discuss the challenges and prospects that incorporating these three developments into future CSR-related research creates. We thereby also introduce the articles in this special issue and show how they connect to each of the three developments. On the basis of this discussion, we outline the contours for a more general program of *distributed deliberative CSR* that enables CSR scholars to incorporate an updated understanding of deliberative democracy theory into their future work.

**Key Words:** deliberation, deliberative democracy, corporate social responsibility (CSR), Habermas, political corporate social responsibility (PCSR)

In 2007, Scherer and Palazzo published their trailblazing work on what is now known as political corporate social responsibility (PCSR). Against instrumental approaches, which derive ethics from businesses' strategic concerns, or philosophical approaches, which either start with contentious foundations or strive for overly utopian goals, Scherer and Palazzo's (2007: 1098) aim was to ground

corporate social responsibility (CSR), and normative questions surrounding business behavior generally, in a “political analysis of the changing interplay of governments, civil society actors and corporations and the institutional and cultural consequences of that dynamic.” PCSR contends that businesses have the ethical obligation to address gaps in legitimate governance by institutionalizing *deliberative procedures*, making collective decisions, and providing public goods (Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016).

This emphasis on deliberation was drawn explicitly from the work of Jürgen Habermas, particularly that strand of theorizing culminating in his classic *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). In contrast to his previous versions of discourse ethics (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1990), where deliberation was couched in overly idealized terms to realize moral legitimacy, Habermas shifted his aims toward a theory of deliberative democracy. The core idea of deliberative democracy was that political society had been severed from its social bases, given an overemphasis on systems like the market and state bureaucracy, leaving democracy a hollow set of procedural norms, easily manipulated by these powerful forces. To be democratically legitimated, law and government needed to be rejoined to the society they governed via the critical scrutiny of an empowered deliberating public. Given its significance for both legitimating and influencing the coercive powers of the state, Scherer and Palazzo (2007) saw in Habermasian deliberation a procedure capable of doing similar work for the corporation, now itself becoming a key governing institution in a globalized and porous world. This has spawned a great deal of literature on what normative deliberation should look like in the corporate context, how to realistically implement it, and how to reconcile it with other challenges businesses face (Dawkins, 2022; Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Gilbert & Behnam, 2009; Gilbert & Rasche, 2008; Sabadoz & Singer, 2017; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Schormair & Gilbert, 2021).

Yet, as this research program was taking off in CSR, political theorists and philosophers had already begun refashioning and rethinking the theory of deliberative democracy as the result of both disagreements within the camp of deliberative democrats and criticisms levied from without. The result has been different “generations” of deliberative democratic thought (Elstub, Ercan, & Mendonça, 2016) that constitute a variety of theories of deliberative politics. These theories range widely in terms of prescriptive aims, ontological foundations, and fidelity to the deliberative democracy project. Yet, what broadly unites them is a certain sensitivity to where deliberation is taking place within a social system (underappreciated in the original Habermasian formulation) and how that might alter the discursive standards aspired to therein (Parkinson, 2018; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Warren & Mansbridge, 2013).

We therefore believe it is fair to say that the use of deliberative democracy theories in the CSR field has not entirely kept pace with current debates in political theory. Of course, some scholars have tried to inject the CSR field with these updated “versions” of deliberative democracy (Dawkins, 2022; Maier & Gilbert, 2022; Sabadoz & Singer, 2017; Schormair & Gilbert, 2021). Still, such contributions have

largely been sporadic and critical. At a more fundamental level, the insights generated by political theorists have not yet been fully reflected in the “normal science” of current CSR debates, despite having significant potential to advance the field. These developments in deliberative democracy theory, then, fundamentally complicate (P) CSR where deliberation has been justified by reference to the corporation’s likeness to the Westphalian state.

This special issue considers the prospects for, and challenges to, CSR if we fully take on the insights of these recent developments in deliberative democracy theory. Each of the contributions in this issue considers topics related to CSR—for instance, organizational techniques, stakeholder engagement, shareholder governance, and artificial intelligence—from a perspective that is central to more recent conceptions of deliberative democracy, for instance, institutional structure, technological constitution, affective engagement, and systemic function. While each is an achievement in its own right, these articles together provide an exciting picture of what CSR with an enhanced understanding of deliberative democracy theory might look like.

Our analysis proceeds as follows. In the next section, we offer some background on the deliberative project and unpack some of the ideas discussed in this introduction. We recount why deliberative democracy was attractive for CSR in the first place. We thereby revisit the fundamental normative core at the heart of deliberative democracy theory, the functions it has been theorized to serve, and how it fits within the context of business. Next, we consider which recent developments in deliberative democracy theory—namely, deliberative systems (macro level), mini-publics (micro level), and the role of online deliberation—can impact future CSR research. We show the challenges and prospects that an updated understanding of deliberative democracy theory has for theorizing CSR in these three areas and what the articles in this special issue contribute to the debate. We conclude by drawing the contours for a future research program we call *distributed deliberative CSR* (DDCSR). This program is geared toward theorizing an updated understanding of deliberative democracy theory in CSR that takes seriously the contextual and structural factors discussed in this article.

## THE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF DELIBERATION

### *Forms of Deliberation and Its Normative Core*

At the heart of recent debates in both deliberative democracy theory and PCSR lies the question concerning the appropriate normative standards of deliberation. On the one hand, consensus-oriented positions in the Habermasian tradition argue that deliberation ultimately aims to find mutually acceptable solutions for the parties involved through a communicative exchange of reasons (Gilbert, Rasche, & Waddock, 2011; Goodman & Arenas, 2015; Marti & Scherer, 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Scherer et al., 2016). This focus on finding agreement through dialogue has been criticized by others emphasizing the importance of dissensus

for counteracting power asymmetries, which are needed to give marginalized groups and worldviews a more material voice in stakeholder discourses (Brown & Dillard, 2015; Brown & Forster, 2013; Dawkins, 2015, 2022).

On the other hand, moderating positions have emerged in the literature, arguing that deliberation does not need to be exclusively oriented toward finding agreement; it can accommodate dissensus and be more sensitive to power imbalances (Arenas, Albareda, & Goodman, 2020; Schormair & Gilbert, 2021). Dawkins (2022) builds on this perspective by arguing that deliberation in business should be conceptualized as incorporating a variety of deliberative practices. Brand, Blok, and Verweij (2020), in turn, conceptualize the notion of “agonistic deliberation” to capture the inherently contentious nature of dialogues between companies and nongovernmental organizations.

Beccarini, Beunza, Ferraro, and Hoepner’s (2023) contribution to this special issue criticizes the oftentimes naive focus on agreement in deliberative democracy. By building on the interactionist tradition, they explore how stakeholders can maintain some measure of productive conflict without hampering deliberation. In an empirical study of shareholder engagement with US public companies, they investigate how the tension between conflict and consensus can be resolved to produce effective deliberation in stakeholder engagement. They develop a three-stage process model that includes both deliberative interaction and the expression of disagreement to advance dialogue.

In deliberative democracy theory, the debate between consensus and dissensus-oriented accounts of deliberation has been addressed recently by proposing a minimal definition of deliberation (Mansbridge, 2015) that delineates the normative core of deliberation without being overly idealistic or realistic. Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, and Warren (2018: 20) define deliberation in general terms as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern.” This definition allows for distinguishing between good and bad deliberation without positioning the latter as an oxymoron. The normative standards of what counts as good deliberation have evolved over the past years, as the field of deliberative democracy theory has matured (see Table 1 for an overview).

This list of normative standards of good deliberation still retains an element of idealism. Hence, real-world deliberations should aim for enacting these ideals as much as possible while being aware that these ideals will most likely never be fully realized. These standards also provide a guidepost for continuous improvement of deliberative practices. Empirical research on deliberations in the political sphere has assembled a strong body of evidence over the past years showing that good deliberation can happen in public fora, such as citizen assemblies or other forms of mini-publics (Fung, 2007; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). Ordinary people are able to conduct high-quality deliberation, particularly when processes of deliberation are well designed and explicitly reflected upon (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks, & Niemeyer, 2017; Dryzek et al., 2019).

**Table 1: Standards of Good Deliberation**

Standard	Description
Mutual respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One should give highly respectful attention to, and proactively try to understand, each person's own understanding of their experiences and their own interpretations of their words.</li> <li>• Despite the difficulty, members of dominant groups interacting with members of historically subordinate groups should make every honest effort to understand the expressions, narratives, problems, and positions of subordinate groups.</li> </ul>
Minimizing coercive power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The guiding form of power in deliberation should be communicative power, that is, the self-motivating force of good reasons, which can emerge out of processes of mutual communication.</li> <li>• No threat of sanction or use of force should take place.</li> </ul>
Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All affected by an issue should be included in the deliberation, either directly or indirectly through representation.</li> </ul>
Equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All concerned should have an equal opportunity to influence the deliberative process.</li> </ul>
Reason-oriented communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The forms of deliberative communication encompass a broad array of communicative practices, such as testimony, greetings, rhetoric, and storytelling, which combine the cognitive and emotional aspects of communication.</li> </ul>
Orientation toward both consensus and clarifying conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliberation entails a broad spectrum of desired outcomes: consensus can be the result of a deliberation without being the prescribed outcome or ideal goal.</li> <li>• Compromises, where the affected parties find a mutually acceptable accommodation of their differences, are another possibility.</li> <li>• Dissensus represents the other end of the spectrum, where deliberation leads to a clarification of conflicting positions.</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from Bächtiger et al. (2018).

### *The Functions of Deliberation and the Context of Business*

According to Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019), we can distinguish between five core functions of deliberation: epistemic, ethical, legitimacy-oriented, emancipatory, and transformative and clarifying.

#### Epistemic

The epistemic function of deliberation focuses on the fact that deliberation has the potential to find the best possible solution to a problem by involving the affected in a process of mutual communication that draws on multiple perspectives and insights to identify a solution. Through an open and direct exchange of reasons and relevant considerations, problems become more tractable, and a solution can emerge in the process (Landemore & Page, 2014). This epistemic function of deliberation has not been explored in depth so far in the CSR literature, with scholars still largely lacking insight into the extent to which deliberation really leads to “better” CSR-related decisions (with *better* being defined by Landemore

and Page [2014: 230] as “decisions that are as empirically accurate, socially desirable, and morally correct as possible”). As we discuss in more detail later, so far, the CSR literature has focused mostly on the other functions of deliberation.

### Ethical

The ethical function of deliberation refers to the mutual respect that is generated and reproduced in deliberative processes among participants. By exchanging relevant considerations and perspectives openly and directly, in a setting that allows participants to speak and listen to each other, mutual understanding and respect emerge. Hence, deliberation has ethical benefits, as it can lead to a deeper understanding of differences and commonalities and to increased mutual respect among participants. The ethical function of deliberation has been a key driver for introducing notions of deliberation into the CSR literature. The central idea is that business practices can become more ethically grounded once deliberative practices are introduced into the interactions with relevant stakeholders (Gilbert & Behnam, 2009; Gilbert & Rasche, 2007; Goodman & Arenas, 2015; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Patzer, Voegtlin, & Scherer, 2018; Scherer, 2015; Stansbury, 2009; Ulrich, 2008).

### Legitimacy-Oriented

Legitimacy has always been understood as a core function of deliberation. Habermas (1996) conceptualized his theory of deliberative democracy around the notion that citizens always need to be authors and addressees of the law for the law to be legitimate. Citizens need to be connected to the law through participating in public discourse and through more direct involvement in the legislative process by running for elected office or voting for representatives in elections. The concept of legitimacy has also been central to how deliberation has been discussed in the CSR literature. Scherer and Palazzo (2007, 2011) argue that the moral legitimacy of corporations increasingly rests on their active participation in public discourse by participating in or initiating deliberations with affected stakeholders to jointly address common moral challenges, such as working conditions, climate change, or living wages.

### Emancipatory

Another crucial function of deliberation is that it opens up the possibility for disadvantaged groups to voice their concerns and make their situations known to the wider public. The degree to which real-world deliberation actually fulfills this function is obviously contested. However, it is widely accepted that deliberation should have this function if it is conducted according to the standards of good deliberation (see Table 1). In the CSR literature, the emancipatory function is invoked by critics who contend that deliberative processes in business largely fail to give disadvantaged groups a meaningful voice (Banerjee, 2014, 2022; Dawkins, 2015). The dominance of powerful interests and the inability or unwillingness to accommodate fundamentally different worldviews (such as Indigenous perspectives on the role of nature) are among the essential shortcomings of many deliberative processes in which corporations are involved (Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016).

### Transformative and Clarifying

The final essential function of deliberation relates to the possible outcomes of a deliberative process. Through the exchange of reasons and perspectives, participants' preferences and opinions can change during the process of deliberation. Evidence from research on mini-publics shows that such transformation of preferences and opinions can happen, leading to mutually accepted outcomes, such as compromise or consensus (Setälä & Smith, 2018). However, even when such solutions are not produced, the clarification of preferences and perspectives can be a legitimate and important outcome of deliberation. Deliberative processes may not solve a conflict, particularly when fundamental differences exist among participants. In these cases, deliberation can serve to clarify positions and preferences that might contribute to conflict resolution in the future (Curato et al., 2017; Owen & Smith, 2015; Warren, 2017).

## THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY FOR CSR

### *Critical Perspectives on Deliberative Democracy Thinking*

As we noted in the introduction, in finding its grounding in Habermasian deliberative democracy theory, PCSR has not fully kept pace with the debates in political theory and philosophy. These debates have developed as a result of criticisms levied against the original ideas linked to deliberative democracy and from disagreements and debates among deliberative democrats.

Critics leveled the charge that deliberative democracy is fundamentally miscalibrated for capturing the realities of politics and democracy. Politics, according to these critics, always entails people using power to pursue their ends (Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 1999; Young, 2001). This is true in supposedly deliberative bodies like parliaments, where politicians bargain and coerce in order to fashion and pass legislation. It is also and especially true outside of such formal bodies, where lobby groups use financial power to pressure politicians or where social movements use more antagonistic strategies like strikes, protests, boycotts, and riots to pressure political change. In one sense, this is a charge that deliberative democracy was too ideal, trying to impose the norms and dynamics of a social club or philosophy class onto the messier political world (Dryzek et al., 2019; Elstub et al., 2016). But, at a more fundamental level, the criticism is not that deliberative democracy is utopian or naive but that it simply misunderstands politics. Politics and democracy aren't rational processes that have been corrupted by these sorts of instrumental concerns; politics is about power and empowerment, and it can only occasionally or sporadically be rationalized (Geuss, 2008).

Counseling greater deliberation on this view is not just thin gruel for actual political reformers; it is potentially harmful for precisely the *demos* it is meant to empower. How else have the disempowered and disenfranchised gotten more power but through agonistic and combative action? Of course, the theory can be defended as an ideal state of how democracy should be run in some perfect world, but putting it

into practice will undermine the achievement of such a world, given the nonrational contestations needed to get there (Kuyper, 2015; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Owen & Smith, 2015). We can think of this, generally, as the “rationalist critique”—that the initial Habermasian framework assumed and aspired to an inappropriate level of rationalism in politics (Habermas, 1996, 1999).

This rationalist critique was complemented by other concerns. Within the camp of deliberative democracy theory, there was debate over how to implement the deliberative ideal, with particular attention to the institutions necessary for realizing it (Button & Mattson, 1999; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Dryzek et al., 2019; Owen & Smith, 2015). In some sense, this disagreement is intrinsic to the very idea of deliberative democracy. Deliberation of the sort Habermas envisioned is extremely demanding—conscious engineering is required to secure the proper conditions among participants to ensure it is well informed, reflexive, and devoid of inequality. Such deliberation also seems to demand a smallness of scale, to enable the sort of engagement and interaction on which it is premised. On the other hand, “democracy” seems to demand something like the empowerment of the masses, which is hard to reconcile with the small scale of most deliberative projects. It also raises the question of who is in charge of determining the scope and structure of deliberation. If it is not “the people,” then how can this deliberation be counted as truly democratic? Thus, the question arose of how deliberation could be truly democratic, or how democracy could be truly deliberative, without sacrificing either democracy or deliberation (Mansbridge, 2007).

We can think of this as the “implementation debates.” The split was well captured by Chambers (2009) when she distinguished advocates of “democratic deliberation,” on the one hand—reconciling the tension by creating small-scale “mini-publics” who represent the public in various ways but nevertheless can deliberate in this more demanding fashion—and those advocating “deliberative democracy” proper, on the other, reconciling the tension by a less formally demanding conception of deliberation, which can be found in the public sphere more broadly and then channeled and reconstructed through increasingly formal procedures (Elstub et al., 2016).

The question of how to navigate both critiques—the analytic and normative traction of the deliberative ideal, given its mismatch with the power dynamics of real politics, on the one hand (rationalist critique), and its competing pulls toward implementation of the deliberative ideal (implementation critique), on the other—has, in one way or another, dominated the debate in deliberative democratic theory over the past fifteen years, at least in the pages of philosophy and political theory journals. Generally, this has resulted in a sensitivity toward the scale of deliberation, with the recognition that deliberation at the micro and macro levels will require different sorts of normative analyses and concerns.

The rationalist critique brought forth a new generation of deliberative scholars interested in showing how forms of address and engagement at the micro level, beyond those of rational discussion and argument, are crucial for democracy, precisely because they bring inequalities and conflicts into daylight (e.g., Sanders, 1997; Williams, 2000; Young, 1996). The implementation debates have helped

clarify how the macro-level ideal and the micro-level processes of deliberation relate to each other. Deliberation isn't to be scaled up to the level of mass democracy, nor is mass democracy, with its actual messy politics, to be tamed by some deliberative authority. In the following sections, we review three recent developments in theorizing deliberative democracy theory that grew from the rationalist critique and implementation debates: deliberative systems (at the macro level), mini-publics (at the micro level), and online deliberation.

### *Macro Level: Deliberative Systems*

Deliberative systems scholars have sought to achieve the democratic ideal by disaggregating the deliberative process and distributing it to different micro-level bodies and systems throughout society, with the goal of achieving deliberative democracy at the macro level (Parkinson, 2018; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). The approach was given its first definitive statement by a group of well-known deliberative democratic theorists (Mansbridge et al., 2012). It was animated by the insight that “because political judgments involve so many factual contingencies and competing normative requirements, and because politics involves the alignments of will, both in concert and in opposition, among large numbers of citizens, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a political system that does not divide the labours of judgment and then recombine them in various ways” (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 5). That is, precisely because politics is messy and democracy requires a mass scale, we ought not to look for deliberation in one particular venue. Instead, deliberation is better understood as generally distributed across a social system, which feeds into a broader societal deliberation in the aggregate. Thus a healthy deliberative democracy will have space for combative social movements, strategic political parties, and polemical editorials, none of which are in and of themselves conforming to norms of democratic deliberation. The aim, however, is that these nondeliberative practices contribute ideas, norms, and proposals that are then deliberated upon in other settings.

The goal for deliberative democracy, then, isn't to make every smaller institution more congruent with the ideal of deliberative democracy. Indeed, as Hielscher, Beckmann, and Pies (2014) note, a powerful organization that cultivates a sense of legitimacy through democratic participation might be emboldened or overempowered to trespass the autonomy of other parts of the social system that are necessary for democratic legitimacy at large. The goal, instead, is to ensure that these institutions relate to one another in ways that facilitate this broader societal deliberation.

As Sabadoz and Singer (2017) suggested, deliberation in the business context can be approached from a systems perspective in two ways. On the one hand, a company can be understood as a deliberative system itself, in which different parts of the company contribute different things to corporate decision-making. On the other hand, companies can be understood as being part of a wider deliberative system in which they contribute to particular functions of deliberation (such as incorporating ethical concerns of affected stakeholders in relation to negative social and environmental impacts). The corollary of this view is that corporations must also constrain

themselves in respect of other functions of deliberation. Both perspectives have merit and require further exploration in the context of future CSR research.

In this special issue, Krüger's article offers a fascinating contribution toward the former project of understanding corporations as deliberative systems writ small. Through both a careful theoretical analysis and qualitative studies, Krüger (2023) contends that the use of self-organized teams—a management technique that devolves a certain amount of autonomy to groups of employees in solving problems—creates spaces that cultivate inclusive, authentic, and consequential contributions from employees that affect decision-making. Beyond the normative status of self-organized teams, this article opens the door for further study of how different organizational structures and management techniques might facilitate intracorporate deliberative systems. This might also contribute to a better understanding of where such structures and techniques fit within the broader extracorporate deliberative system.

In relation to the latter—understanding businesses as part of a wider deliberative system—one of the crucial areas of future research relates to the global governance of business conduct. One of the most relevant phenomena over the past twenty years in this regard has been the multistakeholder initiative (MSI), a governance mechanism geared toward addressing social and environmental issues by including affected stakeholders (Mena & Palazzo, 2012). While the track record of MSIs in terms of impact has largely missed the expectations of many scholars in the field (De Bakker, Rasche, & Ponte, 2019; Moog, Spicer, & Böhm, 2015; MSI Integrity, 2020), the crucial question remains how to make initiatives like these more decisive and impactful within the wider deliberative system. How can deliberative initiatives like MSIs be more closely connected to the political and regulatory bodies at the center of the deliberative system? In answering this question, we must also take seriously the sorts of power that companies wield and the ethical constraints they must respect to avoid undermining broader democratic inclusion and empowerment (see, e.g., Bennett, 2022; Nyberg, 2021; Singer & Ron, 2020, 2022).

The contribution of Pek, Mena, and Lyons (2023) to this special issue shows that MSIs can also be fruitfully conceptualized as deliberative systems themselves. Adopting this perspective unlocks an insightful analytical perspective that allows for the development of several structural and procedural improvements for the governance of MSIs. Pek et al., however, not only develop their contribution based on macro-level insights from deliberative democracy theory. They also draw on the micro-level literature, particularly research on mini-publics.

Another contribution to this special issue that takes its point of departure in deliberative systems is the article by Buhmann and Fieseler (2023), who discuss what roles actors within the artificial intelligence (AI) industry should adopt when contributing to the governance of responsible AI-based innovation. They outline a multilevel model for distributed deliberation with the aim of governing responsible AI innovation. This model addresses a number of specific AI-related challenges, such as the existence of boundaries between experts and nonexperts and the resulting difficulties for citizens to fully comprehend the content of relevant deliberations. The resulting model outlines different deliberative venues across the AI innovation

pipeline: AI expert discourses, AI mini-publics (in which a sample of citizens with expertise can help to evaluate policy proposals), and deliberations in the larger public spheres (which receive contextualized input through the mini-publics). The article by Buhmann and Fieseler shows the need to connect macro-level considerations around deliberation with specific micro-level procedures.

#### *Micro Level: Deliberative Democracy through Mini-publics*

One of the most prolific research streams within deliberative democracy theory over the past years has focused on small-scale deliberative fora, commonly referred to as deliberative mini-publics (Ryan & Smith, 2014; Setälä, 2017; Warren & Gastil, 2015). Mini-publics can be understood as local assemblies of citizens chosen on the basis of predetermined criteria of representativeness to deliberate on an issue of common concern. Empirical insights into mini-publics have greatly extended the body of knowledge regarding effective ways to organize deliberation among a representative sample of citizens.

Recent research on mini-publics clearly shows that deliberation can live up to its normative ideals, as set out in the second section of this introduction. The Irish Citizens' Assembly, for example, is widely considered a success, giving ninety-nine randomly selected, representative citizens the venue to discuss vital issues, such as climate change, the aging population, or the constitutional ban on abortion. The resulting policy recommendations led to macro-level changes, such as a successful referendum on legalizing abortion and more stringent climate regulation being passed by the Irish parliament. On this score, it is worth noting the similarity between the 66 percent who voted for legalizing abortions in the referendum and the 64 percent who were in favor during the citizens' assembly (Devaney, Torney, Brereton, & Coleman, 2020).

However, the increased attention to mini-publics has also led to new challenges for deliberative democracy theory. Arguably the most significant challenge consists in how to empower mini-publics in relation to the broader political system. Results and decisions of mini-publics so far have only a consultative and informative role; decision-making authority still generally resides within legitimate political bodies, such as elected parliaments and regional governmental bodies. Although mini-publics have shown the benefits and possibility of informed debate between diverse citizens on contentious issues, it remains unclear so far how these small-scale deliberative fora should be empowered to make real material decisions. Lafont (2015, 2019) raises another critical point, arguing that a focus on mini-publics risks losing sight of the wider deliberative system within which they are situated, as discussed earlier. Mini-publics should not be seen as "shortcuts" to democratic legitimacy within the wider political system, as they are the expression of a limited selection of citizens rather than being connected to an open debate in the public sphere.

Interestingly, this debate resonates strongly with the extensive debate on MSIs within the business ethics and CSR literature. MSIs also are a small-scale application of deliberative democracy, bringing together affected stakeholders from different backgrounds to address an issue of common concern, such as negative

environmental or social impacts of business. And just as with mini-publics, the effects of MSIs on the wider governance system of global business are strongly debated and contested. The track record of MSIs in substantially minimizing adverse social and environmental effects of business conduct can be characterized as mixed at best (Moog et al., 2015; MSI Integrity, 2020). It also remains largely unclear how MSIs as governance mechanisms can contribute most effectively to transnational business governance. How do such largely voluntary, self-regulatory initiatives relate to government regulation, in particular on a global scale, where a consistent and comprehensive regulatory framework for business conduct is missing (De Bakker et al., 2019; Hussain & Moriarty, 2018)?

Despite these intriguing parallels, there remain important differences between MSIs and mini-publics that point to exciting avenues for further research. First, the mini-publics literature has put significant effort into scrutinizing the issue of representation and representativeness within deliberative assemblies. The result has been the development and refinement of useful methods of putting together a representative body of the affected parties. With a few recent exceptions (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021, 2022), the issue of stakeholder representation has not been explored to the same extent in the CSR literature. Pek et al.'s contribution to this special issue clearly shows the potential of exploring this issue by leveraging insights from mini-publics research on representation for MSIs. Second, mini-publics have been studied by drawing much more on empirical methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, to uncover new insights into real-world deliberation among citizens. This has been less true in the CSR literature.

While we can draw on a considerable body of empirical research from political science regarding the processes and outcomes of micro-level deliberations in the political sphere, we largely lack empirical research that studies deliberative fora in a business context. Most studies draw on secondary and/or archival data to analyze the deliberative qualities of a particular initiative. A central challenge in this regard is access and transparency: deliberations in business, unlike citizen assemblies, usually are not public events with a high degree of openness, making their study more difficult. It will be crucial, however, to gain more direct access to real-world deliberations in business to understand the underlying dynamics—and how they differ from those of the more-studied mini-publics. Participant observation and other ethnographic methodologies are particularly promising for studying deliberative processes, as many functions and standards of deliberation are enacted in the moment when the deliberation takes place.

Krüger's contribution to this special issue also points toward the need for deeper consideration of deliberation at the firm level. The issue of organizational and workplace democracy (Harrison & Freeman, 2004) has received renewed attention over the past years (Goodman & Arenas, 2015; Scherer, 2015; Schneider & Scherer, 2015; Stansbury, 2009). Whereas Landemore and Ferreras (2015) call for giving workers a more significant say in corporate decision-making, Battilana, Fuerstein, and Lee (2018) suggest that deliberative forms of corporate governance are particularly promising for organizations that aim to pursue multiple objectives at the same time (Mitchell, Weaver, Agle, Bailey, & Carlson, 2016). Battilana et al. (2018)

suggest that insights from research on hybrid organizing (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Besharov & Smith, 2014) show that deliberation within the firm can assist organizations to navigate the tensions between financial and social objectives. Several recent studies suggest that hybrid organizations use deliberative elements like negotiation (Castellas, Stubbs, & Ambrosini, 2019) as well as democratic and consensus-building voting procedures (Mitzinneck & Besharov, 2019) to successfully respond to tensions caused by a plurality of objectives. This has important implications for research on corporate sustainability, which is commonly associated with balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives.

Research on the most ambitious sustainability-oriented companies, sometimes referred to as degrowth businesses, indicates that democratic decision-making plays an important role in their effective governance (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2018). Further research is needed to substantiate the implied relationship between deliberation and corporate sustainability. First, we need more empirical research into how and when deliberation can foster the successful integration of multiple sustainability objectives. Different configurations are likely to emerge as to how deliberative decision-making relates to corporate sustainability. It seems that a deeper investigation, particularly into the epistemic and transformational functions of deliberation in this context, will be crucial. Second, the translation of deliberative approaches to corporate decision-making needs further exploration. Many degrowth businesses and social enterprises tend to apply elements of deliberative democracy on a rather small scale; it will be crucial to explore how these approaches can be adapted to more sizable companies, such as medium-sized and multinational corporations, and whether different deliberative models are needed for these different contexts.

Furthermore, it will be beneficial to study the role of deliberation for transitioning companies toward more sustainable models. As the large majority of firms is still operating with conventional business models, managing the transition to sustainability becomes a crucial task. Exploring whether and how elements of deliberative democracy, when applied to a firm's internal governance and external stakeholder engagement practices, can foster the sustainability transition hence becomes an important research question. Such insights can help advance a context-sensitive perspective on deliberative democracy in business, which avoids importing political concepts into the business world in an unreflective manner. The systems perspective on deliberative democracy, discussed earlier, opens up the possibility to context-specific theorizing, and this opportunity needs to be harnessed going forward.

#### *Online Deliberation: Adopting Digital Technologies*

The recent systemic turn in deliberative democracy theory highlights that deliberation as a communicative activity is limited not only to classical face-to-face dialogues between stakeholders (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2011; Elstub et al., 2016; Parkinson, de Laile, & Franco-Guillén, 2022). Citizens have many opportunities for participation in policy-making processes in both formal (institutional) and informal (noninstitutional) spheres of communication. In response to technological developments and the rise of the internet, both political institutions and firms have started to draw on online deliberation as a form of participation for

affected stakeholders in decision-making processes (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Habermas, 2021). Some authors even claim that online fora are especially well suited for stakeholder deliberation because of their low cost, easy access, and flexibility (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Furthermore, stakeholders are often distributed across countries and time zones and are therefore likely to prefer online deliberation (Manosevitch, 2014; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018).

The main theoretical basis for online deliberation resides in Habermas's (1992, 1996, 2021) theory of the deliberative public sphere. The relevant literature therefore agrees that online deliberation should be conceptually linked to the theory of deliberative democracy and must ideally meet the same criteria of "good deliberation" (see Table 1) as offline deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Online discussions must be respectful, inclusive, rational, reason and consensus oriented, and reciprocal (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Wright & Street, 2007). However, online deliberation is a challenging process because the deliberative quality of such communication can be undermined in a number of ways. Research has focused on three interrelated dimensions of online deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015: 323) that help us understand how best to safeguard deliberative quality in the context of CSR.

#### Design Decisions for Online Deliberation (Input)

The quality of online deliberation depends, among other things, on the design choices that are being made (Forestal, 2022; Schäfer, Müller, & Ziegele, 2022). For instance, the level of synchronicity or asynchronicity within online deliberation has attracted some attention (De Brasi & Gutierrez, 2020). Real-time discussions, such as facilitated by chatrooms, may provide a solid basis for small talk or jokes, whereas asynchronous discussions without time constraints (e.g., fora) seem better suited to offering the chance for rational and critical debates because participants have more time to justify their input (Janssen & Kies, 2005). Research has also clarified that the more specifically the topic related to deliberation is defined, the better targeted the online discussion and responses will be (Esau, Friess, & Eilders, 2017). Other scholars have highlighted that active online moderation helps to increase the quality of deliberation. Only via active online moderation can it be ensured that comments are respectful and that stakeholders abide with the criteria for deliberation defined in the theory of deliberative democracy (Janssen & Kies, 2005). In this context, it will also be interesting how support technologies like machine learning and natural language processing can allow larger numbers of stakeholders to discuss shared problems. Shortall, Itten, van der Meer, Murukannaia, and Jinker (2022) discuss the design of digital mass deliberation platforms and highlight the need to explore if and how automated facilitation techniques can assist moderators to improve discussions, save time, and give equal voice to all stakeholders affected by an issue.

#### The Online Deliberative Process (Throughput)

While the input dimension deals with how deliberative spaces should be designed, the throughput dimension asks how people should communicate in an online

setting. This discussion overlaps with the criteria for “good deliberation” in general; however, particular features characterize online deliberation processes. Much emphasis has been put on the underlying rationality of information. Scholars have emphasized that participants need to make information available (e.g., to support improved reasoning) and that the quality and relevance of this information need to be secured (Towne & Herbsleb, 2012). Another measure for rationality is whether participants provide information sources and empirical evidence related to their claims (Friess & Eilders, 2015). Considering that fake news and bullshit communication (Christensen, Kärreman, & Rasche, 2019) can distort democratic processes, a focus on sourcing reliable information seems important. In fact, recent research shows that quality deliberation can reduce the belief in fake news (Bago, Rand, & Pennycook, 2020).

#### Effects from Online Deliberation (Outcomes)

As with face-to-face deliberation, outcomes of online deliberation relate to individual-level outcomes as well as the quality of the underlying decisions. Although much research has focused on the input and throughout of online deliberation, comparatively little research discusses outcomes. The quality of the underlying decisions has been discussed by Delli Carpini et al. (2004), who emphasize that deliberation in online settings is unlikely to result in consensus, as opinion polarization and enclave communication become more likely. Individual-level outcomes of online deliberation can include greater awareness of others’ points of view as well as a more enhanced repertoire of arguments (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002). Min (2007), however, cautions that such outcomes are not specific to online deliberation and can also be reached through face-to-face communication.

Future CSR research can benefit significantly from the insights created by the online deliberation literature. Although CSR scholars are aware that firms practice stakeholder dialogue through online fora and social media channels (see, e.g., Seele & Lock, 2015), there is surprisingly little discussion of how to design such fora and which design features allow for quality deliberation in social media settings. Such scholarly knowledge is important because PCSR relies on moral legitimacy, which can originate from online as well as face-to-face deliberation. In times when more and more stakeholders collect and analyze CSR information through online channels, more in-depth knowledge on the enablers and limits of the role of online deliberation in CSR-related stakeholder dialogues seems important and timely. Such research should, however, not exclusively focus on online deliberation. It must also consider how more traditional forms of offline deliberation can be meaningfully completed through online means.

In this special issue, the article by Castelló and Lopez-Berzosa (2023) explicitly addresses online deliberation. Their article is based on an analysis of social media engagements between civil society actors and corporations around plastic pollution. Their findings stretch across the three discussed dimensions of online deliberation. The study shows that civil society actors wanted to maintain their moral positions on plastic pollution but also tried to avoid disengagement and polarization (input dimension). They therefore employed what Castelló and

Lopez-Berzosa call inclusive-dissensus strategies—that is, including the adversary into the conversation and celebrating a common approach while also shaming and blaming firms (throughput dimension). Finally, they show that one outcome of the online deliberation process was that firms felt included in the community of those fighting against plastic pollution (outcome dimension). This study shows that stakeholders are capable of online deliberation when the underlying deliberative process is well arranged (Dryzek et al., 2019) and room for dissensus is created. Like any other form of deliberation, online deliberation is subject to challenges and constraints (e.g., anonymity and lack of motivation) that need to be managed in deliberate ways (Price, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018).

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we have offered some background on the concept of deliberative democracy and its applications to CSR scholarship. What the updates to deliberative democracy theory demand of CSR, we contend, is a foregrounding of institutional scale and structural situatedness when considering deliberation in the corporate context. We must neither simply assume that contexts in which businesses operate are democratically justified by deliberation nor apply the deliberative process to corporations as if they were states writ small. Instead, insofar as CSR ought to be informed by theories of deliberative democracy, it must do so in a way that treats the structure, content, and outcomes of deliberation as variables affected by social, political, and normative contexts.

We conclude here, perhaps somewhat presumptuously, by offering a program for CSR that is informed by these debates and advances. We believe that CSR informed by deliberative democracy must be oriented toward the social and structural contexts in which businesses operate and by which deliberation must be normatively assessed. We call this research program *distributed deliberative CSR (DDCSR)*. As we envision it, this research program has four commitments.

First, businesses must be understood as *socially and politically situated*. Although deliberative democracy is taken as a benchmark for democratic legitimacy and quality, the more proximate ethics for businesses and organizations is informed by a knowledge of the role they play within society, the power they wield, and their actual capacities for democratic deliberation given that role. That is, the normative ideal of deliberation is not applied directly to the local context. Instead, the local context is analyzed in light of the normative ideal of deliberative democracy as refracted through facts about the broader social system and businesses' place in it. CSR scholars, then, must always foreground the social and systemic contexts in which businesses operate when plying their trade.

Second, businesses must be treated as *normative subjects*. DDCSR requires that businesses be the subject of constraints in service of deliberative legitimacy in the aggregate, not only as the forum for deliberation to secure their own parochial legitimacy. In contrast to PCSR as ordinarily articulated, the DDCSR program demands that we focus on how the corporation *differs* from the state and therefore

how it contributes to, and must be uniquely constrained by, a commitment to deliberative democracy in ways that are distinct from the state. CSR scholars, in our view, must never assume that corporations are state analogues or polities writ small, because that also assumes a normative authority to which they are not necessarily entitled. The question must always be, what does deliberation demand of businesses, both internally and externally?

Third, and related to the foregoing, such analyses must be *scale sensitive*. Understanding businesses as socially situated normative subjects means differentiating between the micro and macro levels of deliberation and locating how the unique nature of businesses' social structure might affect deliberation at each scale. The normative principle that animates criticism of a society writ large may not apply to a corporate organizational structure nor a notice of complaint by an employee. What deliberative democracy demands in any situation will not be uniform or constant. We thus don't demand the same deliberative behavior of op-ed writers, BLM activists, Reddit, or parliamentarians. Rather, DDCSR starts with the premise that there will be different ethics and prescriptive reforms given the situation and context of the deliberants and how they relate to society in some broader fashion. Analyses never simply assume that some ideal or concept travels from scale to scale without modification; CSR scholars must demonstrate that such conceptual application is appropriate.

Finally, DDCSR also demands scale sensitivity in a different sense, which is that analyses leave open the *possibility of integration*. Different analyses will focus on different scales: some theorists will be more interested in the macro-level analyses, other scholars in micro-level data. This division of labor is as it should be. However, scale sensitivity requires that such analyses never foreclose the possibility of differences at other scales. A sociological critique that entails the uniformity of normative principles at all lower scales (e.g., by claiming that corporations must necessarily abide by the same principles as states) or a micro-level study of corporate organization that denies the significance of the broader context (e.g., by claiming that the normative standards of corporate governance are constant in the face of changing economic or political variation) does not respect the possibility of integration, as neither can be integrated with other inquiries into other scales.

DDCSR isn't proposed merely as some sort of academic keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, so that CSR scholars are keeping pace with political theory and philosophy. Although these four planks do bring the PCSR project in line with the cutting edge of deliberative democracy theory, they also bring PCSR into a kind of political maturity. PCSR was right that studies of CSR all too easily fall into a cynical instrumentalism or a high-handed moralism. But to make good on the promise of a PCSR, we must guard against treating political ideals as their own sorts of ethical universals, an abstract moralism with a political cover. Foregrounding social analysis in the way DDCSR demands helps CSR scholars do precisely this. A detailed debate about whether DDCSR represents an alternative, reboot, or update of the PCSR project is beyond the scope of this introduction. This is less important, in our view, than centering these systemic structural factors in research going forward.

DDCSR might even contribute to reconfiguring the balance of influence between CSR and philosophy. For understandable reasons, some CSR scholars have taken their cue from philosophy with its well-developed theories, methods, and traditions of moral analysis. Yet, as the development of deliberative democracy illustrates, such moral theories require sociological and institutional analyses, not only at the level of application, but in substantive articulation. CSR scholars are unique in both being interested in the normative while also (hopefully) understanding the nature of corporate and commercial institutions beyond the macro level on which economists and political scientists focus. DDCSR thus hopes not only to make CSR more political but also to make political theory more sensitive to the insights of CSR scholars. To appropriate the phrase of a famous bearded German, CSR scholars have only interpreted philosophy in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

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