

Guest Editors' Introduction

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

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Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Published in:
Business Ethics Quarterly

DOI:
[10.1017/beq.2022.35](https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2022.35)

Publication date:
2023

License
Unspecified

Citation for published version (APA):

Gilbert, D. U., Rasche, A., Schormair, M. J. L., & Singer, A. (2023). Guest Editors' Introduction: The Challenges and Prospects of Deliberative Democracy for Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 33(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2022.35>

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Download date: 18. Apr. 2025



Business Ethics Quarterly

THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY FOR CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the use of the concept of deliberative democracy in 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. Based on this discussion, we outline the contours for a more general program of *distributed deliberative CSR* (DDCSR) which enables CSR scholars to incorporate an updated understanding of deliberative democracy theory into their future work.

KEYWORDS

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 fill this gap in legitimacy through the institutionalization of *deliberative procedures*, collective decisions, and the provision of public goods (Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016).

This emphasis on deliberation was drawn explicitly from the work of Jürgen Habermas (1996), particularly that strand of theorizing culminating in his classic *Between Facts and Norms*. In contrast to previous versions of discourse ethics, where deliberation was couched in overly idealized terms in order 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 over-emphasis 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, and how to realistically implement and 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 just 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. There are, of course, scholars who 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 above. 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 new research program titled *Distributed Deliberative CSR* (DDCSR). This program is geared towards theorizing an updated understanding of deliberative democracy theory in CSR.

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 deliberative CSR lies the question concerning the appropriate normative standards of deliberation. On the one hand, there are consensus-oriented positions in the Habermasian tradition arguing that deliberation ultimately aims for finding mutually acceptable solutions for the parties involved through a communicative exchange of reasons (Gilbert, Rasche, & Waddock, 2011; Goodman & Arenas, 2015; Marti & Scherer, 2016; Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). This focus on finding agreement through dialogue has been criticized by others emphasizing the importance of dissensus for counteracting power asymmetries in order to give marginalized groups and worldviews a more material voice in stakeholder discourses (Brown & Dillard, 2015; Brown & Forster, 2013; Dawkins, 2015; Dawkins, 2022).

On the other hand, moderating positions have emerged in the literature, arguing that deliberation does not need to be exclusively oriented towards finding agreement but can accommodate dissensus as well as 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 NGOs.

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) which delineates the normative core of the practice of deliberation without being neither overly idealistic nor realistic. Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, and Warren (2018) define deliberation in general terms as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (p.

20). 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).

Insert Table 1 about here

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 guiding post 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).

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, emancipation, as well as transformation and clarification.

Epistemic: The epistemic function of deliberation focuses on the fact that deliberation has the potential to finding the best possible solution to a problem by involving the affected in a process of mutual communication which 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, since scholars have not much discussed in how far 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 will be discussed in more detail below, so far, the CSR literature has mostly focused on the other functions of deliberation.

Ethical: The ethical function of deliberation refers to the mutual respect which is generated and reproduced in deliberative processes amongst participants. By exchanging relevant considerations and perspectives openly and directly in a setting which allows participants to speak and listen to each other, mutual understanding and respect emerges as a consequence. Hence, deliberation has ethical benefits, as it can lead to a deeper understanding of differences and commonalities, thus increasing mutual respect amongst participants and society as a whole. The ethical function of deliberation has been a key driver for introducing notions of deliberation into the CSR literature. The central idea being that business practices can become more ethically grounded once deliberative practices are introduced in 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: Legitimacy has been conceptualized as a core function of deliberation in relevant theoretical accounts. Habermas (1996) conceptualized his theory of deliberative democracy around the notion that citizens always need to be authors and addressees of the law in order for the law to be legitimate. Citizens need to be connected to the law through participating in public discourse as well as 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 & 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.

Emancipation: Another crucial function of deliberation is that it opens up the possibility for disadvantaged groups to voice their concerns and make their situation known to the wider public. The degree to which real-world deliberation actually fulfils this function is obviously contested. However, it is widely accepted that deliberation should have this function if conducted according to the standard of good deliberation (see Table 1). In the CSR literature, the function of emancipation is invoked by the critical voices arguing that deliberative processes in business largely failed so far to give disadvantaged groups a meaningful voice (Banerjee, 2014, 2021; Dawkins, 2015). The dominance of powerful interests and the inability or unwillingness to accommodate fundamentally different world views (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).

Transformation and Clarification: The final essential function of deliberation relates to the possible outcomes of a deliberative process. Through the exchange of reasons and perspectives, preferences and opinions of participants 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, also the clarification of preferences and perspectives can be a legitimate outcome of the deliberative process. Deliberations might not solve a conflict, particularly when fundamental differences exist amongst participants. In these cases, deliberation can serve to clarify positions and preferences which might contribute to a 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 developments have been a result of criticisms levied against the original ideas linked to deliberative democracy as well as from disagreements and debates amongst deliberative democrats.

Critics levelled the charge that deliberative democracy is fundamentally miscalibrated for capturing actual politics and democracy. Politics, according to these critics, always entail 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 in order 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 naïve, but just 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). Counselling 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 actually undermine the achievement of such a world, given the non-rational contestations needed to get there (Kuyper, 2015; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Owen & Smith, 2015). We can think of this, generally, as "the rationalist critique." The initial Habermasian framework assumed and aspired to an inappropriate level of rationalism in politics (Habermas, 1996, 1999).

This rationalist critique was complemented by another stream of critical voices. Within the camp of deliberative democracy theory, there was debate over how to implement the deliberative ideal, with a particular attention toward the institutions necessary for realizing it (Button &

Mattson, 1999; 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 envisioned by Habermas is extremely demanding and requires much conscious engineering in order to secure the proper conditions, the proper relations, and the proper engagement amongst participants to ensure it is, for example, devoid of inequality, well-informed, and reflexive. Such deliberation also seems to demand a smallness of scale, to enable the sort of engagement and interaction it is premised upon. 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” can this deliberation be counted as truly democratic? Thus, the question rose of how deliberation could be truly democratic, or how democracy could be truly deliberative, without sacrificing either (Mansbridge, 2007).

We can think of this as “the implementation debates.” The split was well-captured by Chambers (2009) who distinguished advocates of “democratic deliberation” on the one hand – reconciling the tension by creating small-scale “mini-publics” which represent the public in various ways but could 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 more and more formal procedures (Elstub et al., 2016).

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 the implementation of the deliberative ideal given its competing pulls (implementa-

tion critique) – has, in one way or the other, dominated the debate in deliberative democratic theory over the past 15 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., 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: deliberative systems (macro-level), mini publics (micro-level), and online deliberation. These three developments were inspired by and based on the rationalist and implementation critiques.

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 “[b]ecause 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, but see deliberation 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, with the aim of having these 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 over-empowered to trespass the autonomy of other parts of the social system, necessary for democratic legitimacy at large. The goal, instead, it to make sure these institutions relate to one another in ways that facilitate this broader societal deliberation.

As suggested by Sabadoz and Singer (2017), deliberation in the business context can be approached from a systems perspective in two ways. On the one hand, companies can be understood as a deliberative system themselves, 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), but then must also constrain themselves

in respect of other functions of deliberation, such as the legitimacy of corporate-centred stakeholder deliberation within the wider societal context. 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 contends that the use of self-organized teams – a management technique that devolves a certain amount of autonomy to groups of employees in solving certain problems – create spaces that cultivate inclusive, authentic, and consequential contribution 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 intra-corporate deliberative systems, as well as where such structures and techniques fit within the broader extra-corporate deliberative system.

In relation to the latter, i.e., understanding businesses as parts of a wider deliberative system, one of the crucial areas of future research relates to the issue of global governance of business conduct and the contributions of deliberative initiatives with business involvement for the wider deliberative system. One of the most relevant phenomena over the past 20 years in this regard have been multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) which are a governance mechanism geared towards 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 (Bakker, Rasche, & Ponte, 2019; Moog, Spicer, & Böhm, 2015; MSI Integrity, 2020), the crucial question remains how to make initiatives like this more decisive and impactful within the wider deliberative system. How can deliberative

initiatives, such as MSIs be more closely connected to the political and regulatory bodies at the centre 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 in order to avoid undermining broader democratic inclusion and empowerment (see for instance, Bennett, 2022; Nyberg, 2021; Singer & Ron, 2020, 2022).

The contribution of Pek et al. in this special issue shows that MSIs can also be fruitfully conceptualized as deliberative systems themselves. Adopting this perspective unlocks an insightful analytical perspective on a widely established global governance institution which 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. Their article discusses what roles actors from within the artificial intelligence (AI) industry should adopt when contributing to the governance of responsible AI-based innovation. They outline a multi-level model for distributed deliberation with the aim of governing responsible AI innovation. This model addresses a number of challenges that are specific to deliberation on AI-related matters, such the existence of boundaries between experts and non-experts 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, ranging from AI expert discourses to 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

paper by Buhmann and Fieseler shows the need to connect macro-level considerations around deliberation with specific micro-level procedures. A topic we turn to in the following section.

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 exploring the benefits and drawbacks of 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 who are chosen on the basis of predetermined criteria of representativeness to deliberate an issue of common concern. Empirical insights into mini-publics have greatly extended the body of knowledge regarding effective ways to organize deliberation amongst 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 as a success, giving 99 randomly-selected, representative citizens the venue to discuss vital issues for the future of the country, such as climate change, the ageing 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. It is interesting to note the similarity between the 66 % who voted for legalizing abortions in the referendum and the 64 % who were in favor during the citizens' assembly (Devaney, Torney, Brereton, & Coleman, 2020).

However, the increased focus on and proliferation of 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 macro level of the political system. Results and

decisions of mini-publics so far have only a consultative and informative role with the decision-making authority still being connected to the legitimate political bodies, such as elected parliaments and regional government bodies. While 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 connected to the wider political system. Lafont (2015, 2019) raises another critical point when arguing that a focus on mini-publics risks losing sight of the wider deliberative system within which they are situated. Mini-publics should not be seen as “short cuts” 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 multi-stakeholder initiatives 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. On the one hand, the track record of most MSIs in relation to substantially minimizing adverse social and environmental effects of business conduct needs to be characterized as mixed at best (Moog et al., 2015; MSI Integrity, 2020). On the other hand, it remains largely unclear how MSIs as governance mechanism can contribute most effectively to transnational business governance. It is debated in how far 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 (Bakker et al., 2019; Hussain & Moriarty, 2016).

Despite these intriguing parallels, there also remain important differences between MSIs and mini-publics which 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. It is a key strength of the mini-publics literature to develop and refine 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. The contribution by Pek et al. in this special issue clearly shows the potential of exploring this issue 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 amongst citizens.

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 which studies deliberative fora in a business context. Most studies draw on secondary and/or archival data to analyse the deliberative qualities of a particular initiative. A central challenge in this regard is certainly access and transparency, as deliberations in business usually are not public events with a high degree of transparency, such as citizen assemblies of other forms of mini-publics. It will be crucial however, to gain more direct access to real-world deliberations in business in order to understand the underlying dynamics. 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 towards the need for deeper consideration of deliberation at the firm-level. The issue of organisational and workplace democracy (Harrison & Freeman, 2004) has received renewed attention over the past years (Goodman & Arenas, 2015; Scherer, 2015; Schneider & Scherer, 2015; Stansbury, 2009). While 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 for the pursuit of multiple objectives at the same time (Mitchell, Weaver, Agle, Bailey, & Carlson, 2016). Battilana et al. suggest that insights from research on hybrid organizing (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Besharov & Smith, 2014) shows 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 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, as sustainability at the firm level is commonly associated with balancing at least three different objectives, economic, social and environmental.

Research on the most ambitious sustainability-oriented companies, sometimes referred to as degrowth businesses, indicates that democratic decision making plays an important role for the effective governance of these organizations (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 deliberation can foster the successful integration of multiple sustainability objectives. Different configurations are likely to emerge how

deliberative decision-making relates to corporate sustainability. It seems that a deeper investigation of particularly the epistemic and transformational functions of deliberation in this context will be crucial. Second, the issue of scalability of deliberative approaches to corporate decision-making needs further exploration. While 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 scale to more sizable companies, such as medium-sized and multinational corporations.

Furthermore, it will be beneficial to study the role of deliberation for sustainability transitions of companies. As the large majority of firms is still operating with conventional business models, managing the transition to sustainability becomes a crucial task. Exploring how introducing elements of deliberative democracy to both a firm's internal governance and external stakeholder engagement practices, can foster the sustainability transition hence becomes an important research question. Generating insights into how deliberation is used within companies to make sustainability-oriented decisions will be important to advance a context-sensitive perspective on deliberative democracy in business which does not overly rely on importing political concepts into the business world without careful attention to contextual adaptation. The systems perspective on deliberative democracy 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 not only limited to classical face-to-face dialogues between stakeholders (Elstub et al., 2016). In formal (institutional) and informal (non-institutional)

spheres of communication many opportunities for participation of citizens in policy-making processes can be found. 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). Many authors even claim that stakeholder deliberation is especially feasible to be realized online because of its low costs and flexibility (Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Further, 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 the theory of the public sphere by Habermas (1992, 1996). Accordingly, the growing literature on online deliberation appears to agree that online deliberation should be conceptually linked to the theory of deliberative democracy and must meet the same criteria of “good deliberation” (see Table 1) as offline deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). Online discussions hence must be respectful, inclusive, rational, reason- and consensus oriented, and reciprocal (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Wright & Street, 2007). Online deliberation, nevertheless, is a challenging process because the deliberative quality of a decision-making process typically determines the legitimacy of a decision. In practice, this means that online deliberation must meet certain criteria promoting its quality. Current empirical research identifies in particular four specific design features that guarantee the quality of online deliberation:

1. The first design feature is a well-defined topic of the online deliberation. Research shows that the more specific the topic is defined, the better targeted the online discussion and responses will be.

2. The second design feature is the availability of information, which serves as a prerequisite for good online deliberation and supports improved reasoning. Stakeholders thereby must not only make information available to all affected parties but also address the quality of information.
3. The third design feature is an active online moderation, which helps to increase the quality of deliberation. Only via active online moderation it can be ensured that comments are respectful and stakeholders abide to the criteria for deliberation defined in the theory of deliberative democracy.
4. The fourth design feature is the level of synchronicity or asynchronicity of online deliberation. Real-time discussions like chatrooms may provide a solid basis for small talk or jokes, whereas asynchronous discussions without time constraints (e.g., forums) seem to be better suited to offer the chance for rational and critical debates.

Research on deliberation indicates that stakeholders are capable of high-quality deliberation when the deliberative process is well arranged (Dryzek et al., 2019) and this also holds true for online-deliberation. Online-deliberation, like other forms of deliberation, also is subject to challenges and constraints like a lack of motivation of stakeholders to take part or the question how to deal with anonymous deliberation (Price, 2015; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2018). In the future we therefore need more research on how to initiate, design and monitor online deliberation and how it can and should be combined with more traditional forms of offline deliberation on the different levels of a social system.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this article we 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 a variable, affected by its social, political, and normative context.

We conclude here, perhaps somewhat presumptively, 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 context 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 planks.

First, businesses must be understood as being *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 business's place therein. CSR scholars, then, must always foreground the social and systemic context 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, on our view, must never assume that corporations are state-analogues, or polities writ-small, since 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 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 of 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 quantitative 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 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 the normative standards of corporate governance are constant in the face of changing economic or political variation) do not respect the possibility of integration, as neither can be integrated with other inquiries into other scales.

DDCSR isn't merely proposed as some sort of academic keeping-up-with-the Joneses, so that CSR scholars are keeping pace with political theory and philosophy. While 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 in order 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 to do precisely this.

DDCSR might even contribute to outing the balance of influence between CSR and philosophy. For understandable reasons, some CSR scholars have taken their cue from philosophy, with their 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 just 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 that economists and political scientists focus upon. 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, we want to thank the former editor-in-chief of BEQ, Bruce Barry, as well as the former managing editor, Elizabeth “Libby” Scott, for their thoughtful guidance and warm-hearted support throughout the whole process. Furthermore, we want to thank the new editor-in-chief team, Mollie Painter and Frank den Hond, as well as the new managing editor, Joanna Osiewicz-Lorenzutti, for the smooth transition and their insights and support throughout the final stages of the process. We also want to express our deepest gratitude to all the reviewers who have provided invaluable comments to bring the articles to the highest academic level. This special issue would not exist without them. Last but not least, we want to thank all the authors who responded to our call for submissions for their hard work and dedication to the review process as well as the participants of the paper development workshop that we organized at the SBE annual meeting in Boston in 2019.

The authors declare that no external or third party funding was used for this research.

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TABLES

Table 1: Standards of good deliberation (adapted from Baechtiger et al., 2018)

Standard	Description
<i>Mutual respect</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening actively and trying to understand the meaning of a speaker's statements to that speaker, rather than viewing the statements as objects to be disregarded • One should give highly respectful attention to, and ask questions designed to elicit, each person's own understanding of their experiences and their own interpretations of their words • Even when difficult, members of dominant groups interacting with members of historically subordinate groups should work to understand the expressions, narratives, problems, and positions of subordinate groups
<i>Minimizing coercive power</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The guiding form of power in deliberation should be communicative power, i.e. the "unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1992) which emerges out of processes of mutual communication • No treat of sanction or use of force should take place
<i>Inclusion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All affected by an issue should be included in the deliberation, either directly or indirectly through representation
<i>Equality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All concerned should have an equal opportunity to influence the deliberative process
<i>Reason-oriented communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 aspect of communication
<i>Orientation towards both consensus and clarifying conflict</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberation entails a broad spectrum of desired outcomes: consensus can be the result of a deliberation without being the prescribed outcome or ideal goal • Compromises, where the affected parties find a mutually acceptable accommodation of their differences are another possibility • Dissensus represents the other end of the spectrum where deliberation leads to a clarification of conflicting positions

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