

## **“People will choose for you”: Corporate social advocacy controversies as a window into the contemporary promotional industries**

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*Stephanie Hill*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Amid calls for more impactful corporate social responsibility and the growing significance of corporations and brands as sites to contest societal values, this article asks how a changed communication environment affects the practices of organisational communication, and with what effects? Through a thematic analysis of interviews, observation at industry events, and collected documents, it examines the motivations for corporate social advocacy, their mediation, and how the risks and rewards of participating in these kinds of communication are understood within the contemporary promotional industries. Using frameworks of contestation and justification, it identifies how constant media scrutiny, a low-trust environment, and investments in stakeholder relationships exacerbated the risks and rewards of social advocacy, pushing corporate advocacy towards tangible actions with governance implications.*

**Keywords:** *Public relations; promotional industries; corporate social responsibility; platforms; corporate social advocacy.*

1 University of Leicester. Leicester, Reino Unido.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7674-9489> E-mail: [sh903@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:sh903@leicester.ac.uk)

Amid calls for corporate social responsibility to adopt an “impact orientation” (WEDER, *et al.*, 2019), organisations are investing in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts that audiences will perceive as credible, in contrast to deceptive strategic communication such as “astroturf” campaigns and greenwashing (LOCK, *et al.*, 2016; LYON; MONTGOMERY, 2015). The promises of CSR position organisational communication as a site to contest societal values, engaging stakeholders including the media, employees, and online publics in conflicts over credibility, greenwashing, and social license to operate (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018; REYES, 2020). Often, the effort to create credible campaigns pushes corporations toward public social and political advocacy (GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; HILL, 2020). With these dynamics in mind, this article asks how a changed communication environment, particularly the rise of social media platforms, affects the practices of organisational communication on CSR issues, and with what effects? It focuses on public relations professionals’ experiences with corporate social advocacy as an arena in which new developments, tensions, and effects of promotional industry efforts are visible and contested.

The article begins by reviewing the literature of corporate social advocacy and platforms; the relationship between advocacy, the promotional industries, and the public; and the theoretical frameworks historically used to understand these relationships. It then introduces the methods used to examine contemporary understandings of corporate social advocacy—a thematic analysis of interviews, observation at industry events, and industry publications. The third section presents the identified themes—credibility, constant communication, risk mitigation, and stakeholders as a double-edged sword. The discussion that concludes the article argues that these themes demonstrate how networked audiences, online and offline, contest promotional industries practice and push practitioners towards material demonstrations of commitment. These findings “support understanding the promotional

industries in a platformized environment as hybrid and contested (Edwards, 2020), a position that increasingly implicates organisational communication in governance debates.

## Literature Review

The practices of the contemporary promotional industries increasingly include a focus on corporate social responsibility, purpose, and advocacy. These practices include interventions such as advertiser boycotts of social media platforms (HE, *et al.*, 2021), corporate boycotts of U.S. states (HILL, 2020), overtly political statements such as connecting U.S. policing practices to white supremacy (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018), and decisions to not stock controversial items such as some firearms (GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018). Research on corporate social advocacy has historically focused on individual cases and the financial implications of corporate advocacy behaviours, but research has begun to address wider strategic communication considerations for organisations engaging in corporate social advocacy (DODD; SUPA, 2014; GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; KIM; AUSTIN, 2022; WETTSTEIN; BAUR, 2016). However, questions remain about how these practices fit within the deliberative frameworks of democratic societies. Critical public relations scholarship argues that promotional communication plays a role in mediating the public’s relationship with the promise of “public representation, voice, and agency” (CRONIN, 2018, p. 44) in democratic and capitalist countries (CRONIN, 2018; ARONCZYK, 2015). This mediation is complex, with established expectations of corporate responsiveness to the public (LOCK, *et al.*, 2016) coexisting with renewed pressure from activist movements specifically attacking corporate social license to achieve regulatory outcomes, such as pressuring advertisers to influence platforms’ content moderation (BRAUN, *et al.*, 2019). Social media platforms are crucial to many of these developments. For instance, organisations share advocacy actions through owned online channels such as corporate blogs and social media, allowing communications teams to justify their own positions and discredit

those of their opponents (ARONCZYK, 2013). However, the ability to self-mediate an organisation's activity is complicated in online contexts, where a participatory public may contest or undermine organisational claims (EDWARDS, 2020; TOMBLESON; WOLF, 2017) and challenge the specifics of CSR efforts (HEATH, *et al.*, 2018). The mediation of corporate advocacy becomes more fraught as a few large platforms dominate technical and institutional structures online, creating pinch points for cultural production (POELL, *et al.*, 2021). Researchers have built a nuanced understanding of online participatory cultures, including dark sides of online cultures, such as “networked harassment” (MARWICK, 2021), along with the political possibilities of online counterpublics (DAHLGREN, 2015). Both sides are relevant to public relations and promotional industries research, where practitioners are often the recipients of online backlash. This article contributes to understanding how participatory cultures affect corporate social advocacy and promotional communication in practice.

In Circuit of Culture frameworks, new technology is positioned as a cultural tool that might empower or disempower depending on the situation, facilitating discursive interactions between public relations practitioners and their publics at the moment of consumption (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2005). The Circuit centres power and conflict and provides a good starting point for understanding issues management as an interface between organisational communication and the public. However, the Circuit only partly captures shifts to issue management in a platformized environment, where how “publics appropriate messages and use them” (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2005, p.101) often includes direct challenges to organisations, drawn from the long memory of the internet (EBERLE, *et al.*, 2013). The Circuit identifies the articulations between points, such as consumption and regulation, as arenas of contestation between PR frameworks and the public, but does not provide tools to examine these contestations in more detail. To examine how PR practitioners understand corporate social advocacy and issues management in a platformized environment, this article

draws on frameworks of justification in organisational communication (BOLTANSKI; THEVENOT, 1991/2006). These “economies of worth” provide an analytic framework for examining how organisations attempt to meet “test[s] of justification” (p.37) based in identifiable worlds of value. These worlds—fame, civic, domestic, market, inspired, industrial—are organized around shared highest principles—competition in markets, reputation in fame, and the collective good in civic—that provide frameworks for critique of organisational communication, either within one world or between worlds. For public relations, they provide a valuable reference for understanding “how and why [organisations] communicate, and what effect their communication has,” (EDWARDS, 2020, p.1546) including how organisations are forced to “engage with challenges from stakeholders” (EDWARDS, 2020, p.1554) within global communication networks. By emphasizing the ways that organisational communication can be both political and promotional (EDWARDS, 2020), the economies of worth contrast with the Circuit’s emphasis of dyadic power structures and provides tools for understanding the values that drive deliberation within the “shared cultural space” (CURTIN; GAITHER, 2007, p.38) provided by Circuit of Culture understandings of the promotional industries.

## Method

Using purposive sampling to identify potential participants involved in corporate advocacy controversies, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with advertising and public relations agencies, brand communication managers, national and international advertising associations, participants in advertising boycotts, and activists. The interviews were supplemented with materials collected from attending industry events such as Advertising Week, the Business for Social Responsibility Conference, and tracking industry discourse about corporate social advocacy between 2019 and 2021 in publications such as *The Drum*, *AdWeek*, the *Branded* newsletter, and the *Conscious Advertising Network* podcast. The interviews were coded using

reflexive thematic analysis (BRAUN; CLARKE, 2019). The initial stage of coding organized the data around core research questions, with the researcher creating categories such as flow of information during advocacy events, the risks and rewards of social advocacy, issue compatibility, and motivations to participate in advocacy. These were re-examined and organized the domain-level codes into themes using an open-ended and iterative approach (BRAUN; CLARKE, 2019). For instance, codes under the broad domain of “risks” were split into the themes of “media scrutiny” and “stakeholder pressure;” codes under the domain of “flow of information” were split into themes of “constant communication” and “external scrutiny.” These themes were then supplemented by observations from industry events and collected documents, and organized into the four headings—credibility, constant communication in a low trust environment, risk mitigation in a complex media environment, and stakeholders as double-edged swords—that structure the results presented below.

## Results

Participants noted risks to inaction or insufficient action on social advocacy issues and potential benefits for quick, credible advocacy on issues where the organisation could differentiate itself as a leader. From the perspective of participants, constant media scrutiny, online and off, a low-trust environment, and investments in stakeholder relationships exacerbated the risks and rewards of social advocacy, pushing organisations towards active engagement with a wide array of advocacy issues. Participants stressed the need for evidence to support the credibility of any public statements they made. The emphasis on demonstrative actions to forestall public accusations of hypocrisy highlights the potential material impacts of strategic communications decisions on governance contexts such as social media content moderation.

## Credibility

One participant summed up risk and reward assessment for advocacy issues as “taking where you have credibility” (corporate affairs, national industry association). Another argued that corporate reputational crises in the 1990’s had “been a bit of a wake-up call for companies to understand how they’re perceived and what they can do about it and their role in society.” The result of this wake-up call was that “spin became quite a dirty word” (head of communications, large tech business) and large companies created “a very developed and sophisticated position on their role in society, CSR, those types of responsibility issues” (representative, international advertising association). The credibility of organisations and their public actions was a consistent theme throughout the collected materials. To avoid the appearance of taking shallow action, participants stressed the preparation of a credible stance that was more than “just barking” (corporate affairs, national industry association) or “noise” (media and public relations, national industry association) or “getting news coverage” (head of communications, large tech business). Preparation included relationship building with relevant stakeholders, consistency in messaging, research, and a reserve of supporting evidence for their position, as well as choosing issues and actions that matched the scale and capability of the organisation.

For most participants the concern was that any advocacy undertaken could withstand public scrutiny. The question of “whether it stands up” (public relations, large restaurant chain) was decisive for participants, whose responses reflected a view that they “should only talk about things [they] know inside and out” (public relations, manufacturing business) and that if they could not “authentically lead in that space [they] usually sit back and let others who can, do” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). As the “usually” above suggests, the investments these organisations had made in credible public stances in certain areas became more complicated if the context changed. Crises, such as breaking news, were one of several contextual factors noted by participants. Other factors included shifts in the government or the

policy environment, such as the passage of legislation that increases liability for websites for sexual content in the U.S or the election of a majority government in the United Kingdom. These shifts provided new targets for external advocacy, as well as barriers to speaking out. For participants, shifts in media and public relations practice, including efforts to escape the “nadir” of public relations’ reputation in the 1990’s reinforced their interest in presenting credible public communication, defined by the connection between public statements and material actions.

### **Constant Communication in a Low-trust Environment**

Every participant identified the need to communicate a clear position on political and social issues to avoid public backlash or perceptions that an organisation might be hiding something. Participants suggested that companies “can’t not take a stand anymore because people will choose for you” (owner, public relations agency) and that regardless of the action taken “we need people to know where we stand” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Total silence on an issue was likely to be interpreted negatively and participants framed communications as taking place in a context where “there was very little assumption of goodwill” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). For example, the absence of a statement on Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 was interpreted by key stakeholders, as “basically like we don’t care about Black people.” Equally problematic were attempts to thread the needle with vague statements or a generic “corp-speak” (co-founder, advertising watchdog organisation) reply to a serious issue. One participant, whose company had been outspoken over Brexit in the United Kingdom, credited their coverage and fair treatment by the press to being clear about where they stood: “what they like is someone that will actually say what they think.” In an interview with *The Drum*, Ben and Jerry’s head of activism, Christopher Miller, noted that the companies that “got the most criticism [over Black Lives Matter statements] are the ones that tried to thread some mushy middle” or who tried to support public

outrage without taking an explicitly political stand. There was overall agreement that “you have to speak to people” (corporate affairs, national industry association) and communicate clear positions to a skeptical public prepared to challenge organisational statements.

### **Risk Mitigation in a Complex Media Environment**

Corporate social advocacy was considered an asset for getting positive media attention. One participant described the outspokenness of their organisation’s chairman about Brexit as “from a publicist’s point of view...an absolute dream. Because what does a PR want to do? He wants to keep busy.” That participant’s organisation had done “in excess of 500 interviews...” with prestigious news outlets (public relations, large restaurant chain). Participants preferred to prepare CSR positions that approached issues in ways “unique for us to address rather than anybody else” (head of communications, large tech business). However, they also described a first mover advantage of corporate social advocacy: “If we’re going to do this, get out as early as possible because...and I hate even saying this, but you can earn some brand goodwill. And you’ll definitely get more headlines, more coverage, more impressions and all that stuff” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Another participant described delay in taking a public stand in terms of missed opportunities “we were getting lots of inquiries to do press around Brexit... Just daily, getting two or three opportunities with really prestigious news outlets that we were having to turn down” (public relations, manufacturing business). Proactive advocacy earned media coverage, while delaying or taking a neutral stance meant missed opportunities. Inaction on advocacy issues could also be a competitive disadvantage, if other organisations in the industry were more outspoken.

Participants were aware of advocacy groups and online publics prepared to respond to their positions. Even though those groups are not necessarily supportive, it was “still very important for us to speak to them and understand where they are coming from and almost work with them as well” (corporate affairs, national industry association). For these groups,

the organisation might take an otherwise low-priority action because “it’s the right thing to do for that audience” (head of communications, large tech business). While pressure from critical groups is not new, participants noted that there had been a “proliferation of advocacy issues” (representative, national advertising association), including indirect risks such as media content, to which organisations must be prepared to respond. Several participants noted the difference between a media environment in which “today’s news is tomorrow’s chip paper” and the current media environment, which made it difficult to hide things from the public or wait for scandals to blow over. In addition, the threat of being exposed as a hypocrite was worse because “obviously everything is online that you’ve ever said or claimed” (head of communications, large tech business). Networked activist groups guaranteed scrutiny of missteps or inaction on important issues that could very quickly become a story in the wider press. As one participant explained, “even a little bit of Twitter backlash is a sign of a potential looming negative story” (co-founder, advertising watchdog organisation). Industry insiders echoed this perspective, emphasizing that organisations needed to respond, even to “a noisy minority” (representative, national advertising association). This participant summarized the threat of online criticism that could move to other media outlets: “...it quickly escalates from one or a few people being noisy on social media to actually being a story on online news and then perhaps traditional broadcast news and so on. And that can happen within 24 hours.” Dedicated publics ready to respond to organisational missteps and inaction compounded the risks of media scrutiny.

Participants described a risk that being outspoken could compound scrutiny because public statements drew attention to those “that took the initiative and said ‘we’re trying to do the right thing here’” (representative, international advertising association). This was the experience described by one participant, who found that media coverage of their participation changed quickly. “...Within 48-72 hours of making that decision the media narrative had shifted ...it had changed from like a show of

goodwill and education to a kind of nitpicky looking for gaps kind of thing” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Other participants described shallow applications of CSR that could “discredit anybody in that space genuinely trying to do something” (public relations, manufacturing business) or suggested that expectations of corporate advocacy were unsustainable: “...it becomes disingenuous and noisy if every single company cares about every single issue, publicly, all the time” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). The pressure to take action was perceived by these participants as a threat to the credibility of the actions taken, and to their organisations’ investment in specific issues and causes.

### **Stakeholders as Double-edged Swords**

In a platformized communication environment, visible advocacy provided benefits in connecting to allies and key supporters, but participation was balanced against strategic concerns. As a participant from an activist business put it: “Being political and being actively political is only a benefit to us. So for us to be outspoken about things that come up...we’ll lose a couple followers and that’s fine. Those aren’t really our people anyway” (worker/owner in an activist retail business). Building connections to consumers and employees motivated social advocacy more mainstream workplaces as well. One organisation noted that “the things we choose to support...are really focused on things our employees might come into contact with and supporting the community that they’re a part of” (public relations, manufacturing business). Other participants noted generational changes to workers and consumers, “they have completely different expectations of what they want companies to do; what they want companies to stand for... And so you need to do something that sets you apart from other businesses” (head of communications, large tech business). Another participant summed up the corporate perspective: “companies are looking at internal communications and internal human resources [when they choose to

advocate]. Because you want to keep people on board” (owner, crisis communications agency).

These investments in employee relationships could become two-way streets. Organisations faced pressure from employees over a lack of action on urgent public issues. For instance, “with some of our clients with the Black Lives Matter campaign...[while they are nervous about taking action]...what I found is a lot of the pressure came from internal...where employees were saying we want you to post something in support of this” (owner, public relations agency). When pressed on why it was important that their organisation be seen acting, one participant summarized that “from a grassroots perspective, our employees demanded it” (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Internal concerns contributed to the perception of risks to organisations that were silent or took half measures, and rewards for organisations that took prompt and credible action.

Participants stressed that advocacy issues should match their “area of expertise” (public relations, manufacturing business) and not stray “outside our realm” (corporate affairs, national industry association). If the issue was outside an organisation’s expertise, speaking up risked exposing them as only superficially engaged. Two participants, whose organisations were otherwise politically outspoken, identified issues that were incompatible with advocacy in terms of their own business interests. One noted, “the only place where we feel like there’s a real risk to our business is if we were outspoken about our industry.” Another noted that they avoided a controversial topic in their industry. They explained “you have to assess, is there any point having a proactive position on this or not?” For this topic, the company “know[s] at some point we will be linked to those issues and we have reactive positions on them but we don’t have an industry leading, we are amazing because of x,y,z, [position].” Because of the lack of an outstanding position, the organisation chose not to comment publicly on this issue. These examples underline the degree to which corporate advocacy took place

in a strategic professional environment in which silence on some issues was incentivized, alongside much more outspoken advocacy.

## **Discussion**

The findings of these interviews, supported by documents and observation from the wider promotional industries, illuminate some of the effects of platformization on communications professionals' approaches to communicating corporate social responsibility. Participants noted the increased pressure to communicate their positions frequently, awareness of online publics primed to publicize wrongdoing or silence on emerging issues, and the connection between online criticism and mainstream news coverage. These pressures placed organisational communication in the centre of political debates and incentivized taking strong stances on advocacy issues as long as those positions were backed by material actions. This discussion section addresses the implications of these findings. Examining the promotional industries through a framework of contestation, considering public relations practice in a changed media environment, and asking how these developments contribute to the hybrid political-promotional nature of public relations (EDWARDS, 2020) with implications for the governance of implicated issues, such as content moderation.

## **Corporate Social Advocacy and Economies of Worth**

Public contestation of what makes good corporate social responsibility, advocacy, and public relations practice contributes to the collapse of separation between commercial and civic spheres. The themes examined above provide insight into how questions of advocacy and governance are mediated through organisational communications professionals and how public, transparent corporate advocacy works to mitigate risks and build key relationships. Participants understood commenting publicly as good professional practice “as long as you can always justify why you are commenting on things’ (corporate affairs, national industry association).

In this view, professional communicators' aim is primarily to manage owned issues and audiences. Outward advocacy was done in line with the expectations of "their people" and because their "employees demanded it." It was done to meet the demands of "that audience" of critical observers. This strategic management of social advocacy opens opportunities for organisations to live up to the "promise" of "public representation, voice, and agency" (CRONIN, 2018, p.44) by taking actions that can be measured and scrutinized by key constituencies, either supporters or potential detractors. To live up to their promises, and to avoid appearing to offer empty words, participants emphasized the need for credible action, defined in material terms. This emphasis created difficulties for communication professionals, who found that their job description expanded unpredictably as people began "looking at the communications department to make decisions" (communications, outdoor clothing brand). Cronin (2018) has emphasized how public relations can act as "vernacular forms of democracy" that mediate "a shift in the public's engagement with the social contract" (p. 44, 14). Within the organisation above, the communications team mediated between "a very clear call to action at the frontline level" and senior leadership, who ultimately have the power to take decisions on these issues. For this participant, the pressure and expectations were beyond what they felt was a reasonable expectation for a communication team: "this is not PR, this is not communication; this is much bigger than brand." They understood that people saw the communications department as responsive to social concerns but felt that the burden placed on their office, and even their company, was beyond what they could deliver. The turn to a brand in this scenario demonstrates how corporate claims to responsibility position them as responsive public intermediaries for emerging issues. At the same time, it illustrates some of the limitations of corporate actors in responding to these expectations.

The media environment influenced how PR professionals understood corporate social advocacy and public engagement. Online platforms could harbour critical minorities, dredge up the history of corporate

public statements, spread criticism from platforms to mainstream media, and provide an outlet for dissatisfied employees. This media environment rewarded companies for quick and credible corporate social advocacy and contributed to a proliferation of advocacy issues as online publics could engage on diverse issues more easily. The pressure that communications professionals felt to avoid negative attention and to restrict engagement with some issues mirrors the dynamics of “morally motivated networked harassment” (MARWICK, 2021). Like the networked harassment that Marwick (2021) describes, the pressure felt by communications professionals acted as normative enforcement—pressuring organisations to live up to their CSR standards, adopt new approaches to advocacy issues, and punishing perceived missteps. The emphasis that participants placed on supporting their public claims with material actions, as well as the concern with addressing critical publics before negative attention gained momentum, points to the regulatory effects of this pressure on communications professionals.

This article demonstrates that communication professionals perceive a need to address social advocacy in ways justifiable to key communities and identifies how they evaluate the risks and benefits of doing so. These findings echo the values of specific worlds of justification—fame, civic, and domestic (BOLTANSKI; THEVENOT, 1991/2006). Participants presented their actions partially as matters of reputation—protection from scrutiny, generation of positive media coverage—but also as civic and domestic concerns in which they needed to address the public good and represent the views of their key audiences and their employees. The domestic interest in maintaining relationships with key stakeholder groups, such as employees, played a role in supporting broader civic concerns in support of justice and the collective good. The economies of worth provide a lens for understanding how the imperative to create justifiable public positions influences public relations practice—forcing organisations to take stronger positions and engage in advocacy in order to meet public challenges. The findings indicate how online publics leverage civic concerns against businesses and how public relations

practitioners interpret those critiques as threats to their credibility. Applying Boltanski and Thevenot's (1991/2006) economies of worth provides a means of understanding promotional industry communication outside of social regulation frameworks such as the Circuit of Culture. The contestable nature of organisational communication acted, in these cases, as a "productive force in social, economic, and political relations" (EDWARDS, 2020, p. 1552) between networked publics and communications professionals, pushing their practices towards socially defined standards of acceptability.

### **"A productive force": Implications for governance**

The emphasis on credibility and positive contributions incentivised participants to avoid "corp-speak," such as deflecting responsibility to legal standards. Instead, participants attempted to build the credibility of their efforts by linking communication to material actions and avoiding participating in debates where they might show up empty handed. For many organisations, where they feel they can take a leadership role or where they feel an external expectation of responsibility dovetails with places where there is not a clear regulator, standard, rule, or authority. As an example, the advertising industry was aware of "an external perception that advertisers should be the ones able to force change. That online platforms like Facebook and Google should listen to advertisers because they are the ones paying their bills, basically" (representative, international advertising association). That perception motivated advertisers to push social media companies, in public campaigns such as the advertiser boycott of YouTube in 2017 and Stop Hate for Profit in 2020, to change how content is monetized and moderated (HE, *et al.*, 2021). While unregulated spaces often present potential risks, they also present strategic opportunities. As one commenter put it, "not once has an advertiser been able to put out a press release about how well they are doing on Google" (Christopher Kenna, in Sonoo, 2020). In comparison, a savvy advertiser could put money into a slate of LGBTQ or Black-owned publishers and put out a press release the next

day—benefitting from moving into a space that is not governed by an established authority to take credit for pro-social actions. In situations like this, the hybrid promotional-political character of public relations activity (EDWARDS, 2020) is clear, as are the incentives for activist publics to use organisational communications as an intermediary for achieving social goals. While this tendency has been particularly pronounced in online advertising, it is also a feature of transnational environments for issues such as labour standards (RUGGIE, 2020), and a growing site of advocacy over issues such as racial justice, LGBTQ+ equality, and gun violence (CISZEK; LOGAN, 2018; GAITHER, *et al.*, 2018; HILL, 2020).

## Conclusions

This article used corporate social advocacy as a lens into understanding the contemporary promotional industries in a platformized media environment. It examined the motivations for corporate social advocacy, how advocacy events are mediated, and how the risks and rewards of participating in these kinds of communication are understood within the contemporary promotional industries. This research identifies how promotional industry professionals negotiate expectations that they will live up to the “promise” of “public representation, voice, and agency” (CRONIN, 2018, p.44) and notes the importance of the media environment in creating pressure for companies to respond to public issues in ways perceived as credible to their audiences. Future research should examine the governance implications of these processes in more detail, addressing how dynamics of public controversy and contestation in organisational communication shape issues such as deplatforming, support for international regulation, and content moderation and speech norms.

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## About the author

*Stephanie Hill* – Lecturer in PR/Promotional Media at the University of Leicester in Leicester, UK. PhD in communication and culture from Toronto Metropolitan University and York University. Masters in communication and culture from Toronto Metropolitan University and York University in Toronto Canada. Co-chair, Emerging Scholars Network at the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). Her work examines the intersection between public relations and regulatory processes in online content moderation and environmental communication.

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Data de aceite: 12/12/2022