Organizations in a World Without Truth:
Exploring How Post-Truth Polarization Impacts and Relates to Organizing and Organizations

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how post-truth polarization impacts and relates to organizing and organizations at large.

Our post-truth era is characterized by a confusing informational and communication landscape, where different communities embrace and build their views on alternative facts (Foroughi et al., 2019; Waisbord, 2018). This results in sharp polarization, as different collectives, not sharing the same vocabulary of assumptions, fail to engage in constructive dialogue, ending up mutually delegitimizing and dismissing each other (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019; Meyer and Vaara, 2020). This inter-group incommunicability of our post-truth polarized times is potentially problematic for organizations. Various streams of organizational scholarship indeed see different dimensions of the organization as dependent on meaningful communication. Organizing, organizations, and organizational life, in fact, depend on the constitutive nature of communication, as it is in and through communication that individuals and collectives co-construct common meanings that co-orient their actions, effectively making organization(s) possible (Schoeneborn et al., 2019; Koschmann, 2016; Cornelissen et al., 2015). In the post-truth environment, however, establishing common meanings, essential for the lives of organizations, is often impossible, leading to unforeseen implications for organizing and organizations at large. Therefore, in this thesis, I explore this matter to disentangle the relationship between communication, organization, and polarization. To accomplish this, I empirically focus on the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy. This case involves highly polarized organizations and social actors unable to communicate effectively over differences of opinion, making it an ideal context for investigating organizational and polarization dynamics. To gain focus, three articles have been developed, each exploring a narrower aspect of the overarching issue.

The first paper investigates how today's organizations polarize by analyzing the organizing of anti-5G activists on social media. This paper starts by acknowledging that social media-enhanced in-group communication both fosters organizing and polarization, and it explores how this heightened interaction could simultaneously constitute both.

Findings show that social media did foster organizing by providing a space for one-sided interaction. However, the organizing dynamics unfolding within such unchallenged space transcended into radicalization and ideological segregation, effectively polarizing them. The second paper explores solutions to overcome the communication breakdown among collectives in our post-truth society. In fact, while establishing stakeholder relationships is key for corporate success, today's polarization often makes it impossible because sides rely on alternative assumptions and facts. The paper thus proposes a framework based on narrative analysis that helps organizations understand stakeholders' views, including assumptions and beliefs, objectives, expectations, and relationships. With this framework, I thus contribute to practice by providing a tool to enhance the stakeholder engagement process and to theory by fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking. The third paper explores how post-truth polarization shapes the organizational approach to CSR. Indeed, the dominant approach to CSR, consisting of establishing an overarching stakeholder dialogue to influence their views, seems impossible in a landscape where polarized conversations occur separately. To address this puzzle, I studied how telecom companies approached CSR in circumstances where two groups of stakeholders were having separate conversations on their related CSR expectations. Findings show that companies engage in CSR with a partisan approach (i.e., by engaging with one side while ignoring and dismissing the other side). This sheds light on the changing nature of CSR communication in polarized environments, which can arguably exacerbate even more the polarization of different opinions.

With these research efforts, my dissertation contributes to the literature by illustrating the existing relationship between communication, organization, and polarization. My research shows that polarization emerges as a side-effect of organization(s), as organizing dynamics and organizational actions may trigger polarizing effects when they unfold in contexts where communication is one-sided. This highlights that studying post-truth and specifically polarization from an organizational perspective is important for better understanding and addressing this societal challenge, as well as for highlighting further unforeseen dynamics of organizing and organization at large.

Keywords: Organization, Post-truth, Polarization, Communication, Qualitative analysis

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1. Introduction

1.1 Real-World Problem and Its Conceptualization in the Literature

The Post-Truth We Live By

In the predawn hours of April 13, 2020, a solitary figure drives toward Almere, a small Dutch town nestled just beyond the outskirts of Amsterdam. Upon reaching his destination, the man halts his Toyota a few meters away from a telecommunication cellular tower. He keeps the engine running. With no one in sight, he dons a black cap and exits his vehicle. He goes around it, and he takes out a white oil container from the trunk. Hastening toward the base of the tower, he pours out its contents, igniting a flame that quickly sets on fire the structure. With quick steps, he retreats to his car and disappears into the darkness. Before leaving, however, he takes a moment to spray a message on a nearby transmission box: “Fuck 5G”.

On the opposite side of the globe, in the serene landscapes of New Zealand, a similar story unfolds. A couple of weeks prior to the above-mentioned incident, indeed, a man was captured on camera hastily fleeing from a telecommunications cellular tower that had been set on fire, with his exultant cries of “Fuck 5G” echoing into the night[1].

These acts mirror a global trend of deliberate attacks on telecommunication cellular towers. Such instances of tower vandalism are indeed not confined to the Netherland or New Zealand alone but have been reported in numerous countries across the globe, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, Cyprus, and Italy. Taken collectively, these assaults directed at 5G infrastructure, encompassed over one hundred incidents during the initial half of 2020 alone. Intuitively, all these acts share the same aim: preventing the deployment and diffusion of 5G technology, i.e., the fifth generation of wireless communication technology[2].

The worldwide confrontational acts against 5G infrastructure to stop the technology introduction and spread are motivated by an array of concerns regarding it. These range from concerns regarding potential governmental control facilitated by the technology to

fears of adverse health effects stemming from the purportedly hazardous electromagnetic radiation emitted.

These concerns have permeated public discourse since the inception of discussions surrounding the introduction of 5G technology, with initial claims of its purportedly jeopardizing features tracing back to as early as 2018[3]. To address these concerns, public institutions promptly implemented preventative laws aimed at safeguarding privacy and imposing strict regulations on the use of 5G technology. In addition, they asked a diverse array of research institutions to conduct studies to evaluate the potential harm associated with this new technology. Cumulatively, these studies have concluded that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that 5G technology poses harm when monitored and maintained within specified frequency limits[4]. Accordingly, public institutions worldwide have established frequency thresholds for 5G technology set below potentially hazardous standards. To comfort the concerned part of the population, public institutions and businesses involved in the commercialization of 5G-based products have disseminated the findings of these studies, affirming the benign nature of the technology. Additionally, they have emphasized the implementation of stringent regulations to monitor potential risks associated with the introduction of 5G[5].

However, these efforts did not help. A significant portion of the global population remains steadfast in their conviction that 5G poses a danger, as evidenced by continued attacks on and arson of 5G towers, with the peak occurring during the spring of 2020. As a matter of facts, these individuals do not trust the reported facts regarding the harmlessness of 5G or the stringent regulatory measures advocated by institutions and companies. Instead, they believe that these entities are actively deceiving the public, and they suspect that experts supporting the safety of 5G are being influenced or remunerated by them to say so. Many of these dissenters embrace a conspiracy theory, positing that the proliferation of 5G is part of a broader agenda to exert control and power over the population. The peak of attacks on 5G towers during the spring of 2020 was not coincidental in fact, as it coincided with the rise of numerous conspiracy theories, fueled by societal unrest and public uncertainty amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The resistance exhibited by many individuals towards information disseminated by institutions, experts, and businesses is increasingly characterizing of contemporary society. A growing number of people worldwide are indeed inclined to adopt a conspiratorial mindset, leading them to reject established facts and instead embrace officially unfounded theories. The ones regarding the supposed harmfulness or danger of the 5G technology, in fact, is just one of the various theories widely embraced in the population despite been debunked by mainstream institutional experts. Various surveys conducted among American and European citizens indeed illustrate this trend, revealing a significant portion of the population subscribing to institutionally debunked beliefs and theories. Depending on the study, the prevalence of belief in at least one conspiracy theory ranges from 26% to 50%, with about 15% consistently supporting conspiracy theories and ignoring facts debunked by institutions and authorities[6]. In short, a substantial segment of the population rejects the facts and information provided by institutional sources and instead embraces extreme and radical viewpoints explicitly contradicted by the established scientific community.

This emerging social phenomenon has prompted commentators and journalists to define our times as the age of 'post-truth'. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs", the post-truth concept was initially rooted in the realm of politics and gained considerable traction in 2016 due to the dynamics that emerged in the two significant political events of the year, namely the EU referendum on Brexit and the US presidential election won by Donald Trump. Indeed, these events were characterized by the proliferation of misleading or factually inaccurate claims and an increased emphasis on emotional rather than logical arguments. Against this backdrop, the term post-truth has become part of the debate to refer to people who do not listen to facts but only to their feelings and emotions, and today it is often used in snobbish fashion by the elite to portray the decay of our times as populated by gullible people who believes in fake news[7].

Since the first use of the term, the academic community has been interested in the topic, conducting investigations into the phenomenon from various perspectives. Overall, these studies believe that it is simplistic to view our age as populated by naive and gullible

individuals who ignore or fail to understand the objectivity or reality of their claims - as the initial definitions suggest. Instead, these scholars propose a much more nuanced conceptualization of our post-truth era, revealing the complex socio-technological dynamics that have triggered and constituted it, characterizing it, illustrating its nature, and suggesting the profound implications this phenomenon may have on our society.

Understanding the Post-Truth and its Characterizing Feature of Polarization

At its core, the phenomenon of 5G tower attacks occurred because a significant part of the population did not believe what the traditional fact-tellers were saying about the harmlessness of 5G but instead embraced accounts supporting the opinion that 5G is potentially harmful for human health. This part of the population did not believe the established institutions and traditional experts and, consequently, the facts they reported, while being influenced by facts reported by other sources.

As scholars note, this embodies the essence of the post-truth era, which is fundamentally characterized by the loss of influence of experts and institutions on public opinion (Waisbord, 2018; d'Ancona, 2017). In other words, in the post-truth era, people are still interested in facts and objective information (contrary to initial and journalistic definitions), but a considerable number of people no longer believe in the facts that institutions and experts report. Consequently, post-truth should not be understood as an era populated by people who are naive and disinterested in facts. On the contrary, it should be better characterized as a society lacking a universally accepted authority on truth, resulting in a confusing information and communication landscape in which alternative facts and truths coexist (Harsin, 2018; Foroughi et al., 2019).

According to scholars, the absence of a unitary standardizing authority on truth and the chaos in information and communication characteristic of the post-truth era stem from the intertwined effects of societal trends and technological advancements. Specifically, the literature converges on two aspects that have had a major impact on the constitution of the post-truth era's character.

First the literature identifies the increasing professionalization and marketization of political and business communication as one of the main causes contributing to the emergence of the post-truth era (Foroughi et al., 2019; d'Ancona, 2017). In fact, this professionalization of communication among political figures and business leaders did not evolve alongside ethical standards, resulting in strategically crafted communication often aimed at deceiving the population through forms of propaganda, frequently manipulating facts and happenings to serve political and business objectives. Due to the repetition and abundance of such deceptive communication, public trust in institutions has eroded. People have learned to cast doubt on the claims of political, business, and media institutions, resulting in a generalized "distrust in the authorities" (Harsin, 2018: 3).

While the societal trend of professionalization of communication has contributed to the emergence of the post-truth era by fostering a widespread mistrust in institutions, the second factor consists of a technological advancement and contributed by introducing confusion and cacophony into public discourse (Etter et al., 2019; Foroughi et al., 2019). The evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT), particularly the advent of the internet and social media, has indeed played a pivotal role in reshaping the communication and information landscape. Firstly, this evolution has exponentially increased the number of sources of information, resulting in a dramatic fragmentation of the media landscape and hence of the social sphere (Harsin, 2018). This fragmentation has shattered the notion of a unified public discourse, giving rise to multiple and contrasting opinions often developing separately and in isolation from one another (Christensen et al., 2019; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). Secondly, the democratization of communication facilitated by ICT has empowered individuals to voice their opinions and participate in public discourse to an unprecedented extent. In the past, only gatekeepers, institutions, and experts had the platform to speak, while the general public remained largely passive consumers of information. However, the rise of social media platforms and user-generated content has democratized the conversation, allowing everyone to contribute their perspectives and engage in dialogue (Etter et al., 2019). This democratization has blurred the distinction between experts and non-experts, as people from various backgrounds now have the capacity to share their perspectives and insights on a level playing field. The

platforms and formats for communication are uniform indeed, placing both experts and non- experts on the same level, thus blurring the distinction between authoritative voices and those of the general public (Harsin, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). In summary, these two fundamental elements of the new ICT evolution - the fragmentation of the public discourse and the equalization of the debate - in a context where no standardizing force on public opinion exists, have created the chaotic information and communication environment characterizing our post-truth era.

Therefore, the escalating distrust in institutions, coupled with the advent of digital media, has engendered today's confusing environment where institutions and experts struggle to establish a standardized notion of objectivity and truth, giving rise to a multitude of alternative and conflicting ones within today's social sphere (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). In this context, these dynamics have fostered an exceedingly diverse and egalitarian discourse, which, from a Habermasian perspective, might seem conducive to an ideal deliberative democracy. However, this proliferation of perspectives and sources, and the flattening of power dynamics, has not yielded such an outcome. Instead, the landscape of post-truth is characterized by sharp polarization, wherein myriad, often isolated, bubbles of judgment, each embracing alternative facts and truths, are often incapable of engaging in meaningful interaction with those having contrasting viewpoints (Waisbord, 2018; Meyer and Vaara, 2020).

This is mainly because the chaotic and confusing communication environment of the post-truth era, coupled with pervasive mistrust in institutions, has precipitated the disintegration of a unified approach to assessing objectivity and factuality (Waisbord, 2018). Traditionally, as articulated by Foucault (2000, p. 131), "each society has its regime of truth", a collective framework encompassing mechanisms, processes, and rules for discerning truth. Until recently, society largely adhered to this regime, relying on shared fundamental assumptions — such as the trust in the scientific process, prevalent in much of Western society — to validate truth claims. The erosion of trust in institutions and the proliferation of alternative sources have shattered these shared assumptions, leading to fragmentation even in the basic principles guiding truth assessment (Harsin, 2018; Bennett and Livingstone, 2018), as evidenced by the growing number of individuals questioning

scientific findings. Consequently, contemporary society is no longer characterized by a singular regime of truth but instead comprises disparate groups adhering to conflicting assumptions and employing divergent mechanisms and processes to ascertain truth (Waisbord, 2018; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019).

Moreover, the characteristics of the primary information and communication spaces of today, namely social media platforms, in conjunction with inherent human tendencies, have contributed to the segregation and isolation of communities that uphold differing assumptions and establish alternative norms of truth. On social media platforms, different users are not exposed to the same sources of information and do not participate in the same conversations. In fact, on these platforms, users are free to choose the sources of information and participate in the conversations they prefer. In other words, they can personalize their arena of information and communication, which consequently differs from user to user. This personalization process is then optimized by social media algorithms that, based on the users' initial preferences and data on their interaction and content behavior, further homogenize each user's social feed (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2018; Pariser, 2011).

These dynamics of social media platforms, combined with the human inclination towards homophily - which is the tendency of people to surround themselves with like-minded peers, avoiding conflicting opinions - lead to the formation of echo-chambered digital bubbles (Etter et al., 2019). In fact, individuals with similar beliefs, attitudes, and tastes tend to be exposed to the same information sources, since they are likely to select the same ones and algorithms are likely to propose similar content to them. Consequently, they are likely to participate in the same conversations while missing others, as the content they interact with is similar. This creates digital bubbles in which homogeneous information circulates among like-minded individuals, fostering one-sided conversations and amplifying an echo-chamber effect that reinforces shared views (Etter et al., 2019; Stroud, 2010). Consequently, this phenomenon has led to the emergence of alternative "rules and practices [...] to define" truth (Waisbord, 2018:9) that create sorts of alternative realities which social media both constitute and sustain (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019).

All these dynamics have given rise to a social sphere characterized by diverse and contrasting communities of belief or bubbles, each operating under different sets of rules to assess objectivity and factuality. Importantly, this forms the bedrock of the sharp polarization experienced in the post-truth era (McCoy et al 2018).

The development of different rules for assessing truth implies the existence of contrasting foundational assumptions (Waisbord, 2018), so that different groups lack "common frameworks of understanding and communication" (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019:184). Without a common ground, constructive conversation becomes "illusory and irrelevant" (Waisbord, 2018:11). Indeed, in circumstances where people share the same regime of truth, or to borrow from Knights and Tsoukas' (2019) terminology, play the same language game, differences in opinion often revolve around varying interests and priorities, emphasizing or downplaying the importance of certain commonly agreed-upon facts. However, in a post-truth scenario, differences in opinion stem from a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the foundational assumptions upon which others build their arguments (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). Metaphorically, different groups inhabit distinct realities where disparate assumptions and subsequent definitions of truth lead to the formation of alternative facts and truths on the matter (Meyer and Vaara, 2020; Knight and Tsoukas, 2020). Consequently, when confronted with one another, they lack a shared vocabulary of assumptions and facts, rendering communication between them virtually impossible (Waisbord, 2018).

This sort of inter-group incommunicability represents one of the most compelling features of the post-truth era - today's pervasive polarization. Indeed, the inability to establish meaningful interaction, coupled with continuous mutual delegitimization, fosters a profound 'us vs. them' sentiment, culminating in a "you got your truth, I got mine" dichotomy (Waisbord, 2018:11). This mechanism starkly divides the population into opposing factions, each asserting ownership over their own set of facts and truths while regarding their counterparts as either gullible and naive or manipulative and deceitful (Harsin, 2018; Foroughi et al., 2019). This perpetuates a vicious cycle of polarization. Polarization, at its core, entails the suppression of intra-group differences while amplifying inter-group ones. Consequently, the impossibility of dialogue serves to polarize groups

further, while the escalating polarization simultaneously renders dialogue increasingly challenging, thus engendering an ever-deepening spiral of polarization (McCoy et al., 2018).

In summary, the literature on post-truth portrays a nuanced picture of our current era, suggesting that it is not simply characterized by widespread disregard for factual and objective information. Rather, it reveals a complex phenomenon that is better suited to illustrate and explain incidents such as anti-5G protesters rejecting the consensus of the scientific community and resorting to violence against 5G towers. According to this body of research, individuals with extreme views, openly opposed to established authorities and experts, are not merely gullible; they are products of intricate socio-technological dynamics. These dynamics have engendered a chaotic information and communication landscape which lacks a unifying force on public opinion. Coupled with the features of modern information spaces and human tendencies, this environment has fostered a highly antagonistic atmosphere, where disparate groups are segregated into bubbles embracing divergent assumptions and facts.

Importantly, embracing alternative facts and assumptions fuels the severe polarization characteristic of our post-truth era. Here, dialogue among polarized factions often ends in mutual dismissal and delegitimization of opposing perspectives and beliefs. This breakdown in communication, which impedes mutual understanding and constructive conversation, arguably represents one of the most pressing challenges of our time. Consequently, it has garnered significant attention from scholars, particularly in the fields of politics, sociology, and media (see Bennet and Iyengar, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). In my Ph.D. research, I delved into the implications of post-truth polarization on organizing and organizational life at large.

1.2 Theoretical Assumptions and Relevance for Organizational Literature

This dissertation establishes its theoretical framework upon the principles of social constructivism, drawing upon the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) regarding the intersubjective nature of human (social) experience as a foundational standpoint.

According to this theoretical perspective, our social reality is not inherently objective or predetermined; rather, it is intersubjective, emerging and existing in and through ongoing interactions among individuals. In this view, during interactions individuals exchange subjective interpretations of their experiences and validate each other's perspectives, thereby gradually shaping shared meanings and understandings. Through repetition on a broader scale, this process reinforces shared meanings and understandings, which eventually reify, becoming deeply embedded in society and materializing in tangible forms and symbols. As these shared meanings reify, they transcend individual viewpoints and manifest as social facts, exerting influence over subsequent interpretations and interactions, thus shaping the broader social landscape (Berger, 1967).

Thus, in this view, the social reality we experience is neither objective (as determined by a superior force independent from human action) nor subjective (as it is not solely contingent on an individual's will or action); rather, it is intersubjective, arising from the consensus established in interactions among individuals and influencing it in a circular relationship.

Under the premise that all social facts shaping our daily experiences are co-constructed and reproduced through interaction, communication emerges as pivotal in constituting our social reality. Indeed, it is in and through communication that we collectively establish shared understandings of our experiences and build consensus upon them, forming the foundation of our social fabric (Deetz, 1992; Luckmann, 2013). Communication, thus, is not only the means through which we constitute our social reality but also wherein it occurs. As Dewey famously stated, "society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication" (Dewey 1916: 10).

Building upon this theoretical orientation, this research positions itself in the stream of organizational and managerial scholarship that embraces this performative understanding of communication. This scholarship recognizes that communication does not simply represent social reality nor is it merely a tool for the faithful transmission of pre-existing realities. Instead, communication is action, which actively constitutes the social reality we

experience every day, playing a crucial role in its reproduction, maintenance, and emergence.

Collectively, these streams of organizational and management scholarship contribute to the field by highlighting the constitutive role of communication across three dimensions of the realm of organization studies, namely organizing, organizations, and organizational life. In the next pages I am going to discuss how the literature has illustrated and explained the communication-constitutive nature of each of these three dimensions.

Organizing in and through Communication

The dimension that has been most comprehensively investigated from the theoretical standpoint of communication-as-performative is arguably organizing. A significant portion of the academic discourse exploring the dynamics of organizing through these perspectives can be linked to the theoretical framework known as 'Communication Constitutes Organization' (CCO). The origins of the CCO community can be traced back to the seminal works of Taylor in the late 1980s and early 1990s (1988; 1993), who, drawing particularly from Austin's (1967) Speech-act theory, initiated a theoretical exploration of organizing practices as constituted through communication practices.

The foundational insight was that within organizations, when individuals make claims, they are not merely representing reality but actively shaping it. Organizational members engage in various communicative actions such as committing to tasks, issuing orders, authorizing, dividing tasks within broader projects, and altering the potentiality of a situation, for instance, by declaring something open or initiated (Cooren, 2000; Cooren and Seidl, 2022). Moreover, organizational members align interpretations by providing accounts of past, present, and future situations, thereby influencing attitudes and consequent behaviors (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011).

Building upon these insights, CCO scholars recognized that all structuring, coordinating, and aligning actions facilitating group organization to accomplish complex tasks and pursue common goals – thus organizing – are essentially communicative actions. In fact, all organizing practices enabling the existence of an organization unfold through

communication. This observation made scholars realize the "inherent ordering or organizing properties" of communication (Schoeneborn et al., 2019: 485). Consequently, CCO scholars asserted that communication "cannot be considered simply one of the many factors involved in organizing" but rather as the factor through which "organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained" (Cooren et al., 2011: 1150). This scholarship thus rejected the conventional notion of organizations as mere containers within which communication occurs, instead embracing the understanding that "organizational phenomena come into existence, persist, and are transformed in and through interconnected communication practices" (Schoeneborn et al., 2019: 476), thereby viewing organizing as acts of communication.

Organization in and through Communication

CCO scholars not only assert the communicative constitution of organizing in terms of the communicative practices that facilitate coordination and structuration within organizational collective actions but also argue that communication "creates, generates, and sustains—constitutes—what we consider to be organization" (Schoeneborn et al., 2019: 476) in terms of actorhood, meant as the group's collective agency and role in the environment, as well as its characteristics.

While the foundational assumption regarding the constitutive processes facilitating the emergence of social realities remain consistent, this stream of research illustrates not only how organizational members' communication shapes organizations in terms of their organizing (by structuring collective action) but also that the existence of an organization as a social actor in the environment is formed through communication with and among other social actors.

For instance, Kuhn (2008: 1231), in his *Communicative Theory of the Firm*, adopts a CCO-based understanding of the organization not "as stable and material entities [but] as ongoing accomplishments generated, sustained, and continually modified through communicative practice". Building on this view, he suggests that organizations, as entities and social actors, are constituted through complex meaning negotiations that extend beyond internal member interactions, involving communication practices of external

social actors interacting with the organization. In this sense, the organization comes into being through its activation and reproduction in the communication of other social actors, which acknowledge its existence and enable it. Other scholars have similarly proposed that an organization "gains collective actorhood status through recurrent communicative and cognitive attributions" from other social entities (Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021: 121). Therefore, in this relational sense, an organization's actorhood is understood as mutually affirmed by social actors, and thus the organization as a social actor emerges in communicative relationships.

An important implication of these contributions is that, as organizations emerge through communication with and among other actors, they are also characterized by these mutually constitutive communication practices. Indeed, as Koschmann (2016) observes, key organizational characteristics such as power and legitimacy derive from the communicative constitution of shared meanings and understandings in societal interactions. Therefore, when asserting that organizations as social actors are relationally constituted through communication, it implies that they are also ascribed the very characteristics they possess in this process and do not exist outside of these communication practices. To use the scholars' own words, "these [external] relations make organizations what we consider them to be – they have no reality outside of these networks of relations". (Koschmann, 2016: 12).

Organizational Life in and through Communication

While less extensively explored compared to the investigation into the communicative constitution of organizing and organizations, researchers have also delved into the notion that communication constitutes organizational life. Broadly conceived, this notion pertains to the idea that societal norms, rules, and conventions governing and guiding organizational behavior emerge and are shaped in and through communication processes.

This concept is situated within the framework of institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which posits, in essence, that the environment in which an organization operates is inhabited by institutions — namely, rules, norms, and conventions —which

organizations must align and comply with. According to some researchers contributing to this field, communication plays a constitutive role for institutions.

This notion can be traced back to Phillips et al.'s (2004) influential work *Discourse and Institutions*, wherein scholars argue that the process of institutionalization—how norms, rules, and conventions guiding organizational behavior establish, becoming taken-for-granted, or institutionalized—largely depends on texts. These texts encompass communicative (both discursive and non-discursive) accounts and reactions to the various actions produced by the diverse actors within the environment. Through interaction, these texts engage with one another and converge into more influential texts. Over time, through repetition, these texts amalgamate into societal discourses — established ways of thinking and acting about a subject — which eventually solidify into the institutions governing organizational life.

This discursively constituted understanding of institutions has been reconceptualized specifically in terms of communication by Cornelissen and colleagues (2015), who even proposed the idea of communicative institutionalism as a theoretical lens. They explicitly attribute a constitutive role to communication, as it is primarily through communication that institutions exist, are enacted, and take shape. In this sense, the "established rules and conventions that govern collective thoughts, intentions, and behavior" (p. 10) emerge from ongoing communicative interactions and solidify as shared understandings. Put differently, it is "through interaction [that] actors themselves construct a common base of understanding regulating their thoughts and behavior" (p. 15); an idea well-established in the institutional literature (see, for example, Phillips and Oswick, 2012; Meyer et al., 2018; Meyer and Vaara, 2020).

Research Question

In summary, the organizational and management scholarship embracing a performative understanding of communication has underscored that organizing, organizations, and organizational life are all constituted in and through communication.

First, in and through communication organizational members coordinate and structure collective action, thus effectively constituting organizing. Moreover, communication is the essence of the relational and mutually constitutive construction of organizations' actorhood and characterization. Additionally, communicative processes embody and shape the institutions that channel and govern organizational life.

All these fundamental dimensions of the organizational and managerial field thus come into existence because of the communication's property of establishing intersubjective understandings. Indeed, the communicative interactions of individuals and collectives converge interpretations towards shared meanings and understanding, which serve as the basis for a) the alignment and coordination of individuals to organize collective action, b) organizations' mutual recognition and reaffirmation of each other's status as social actors and characteristics, and c) the establishment of institutions governing organizational life. Therefore, the sharing and reification of common meanings and understandings that construct social realities are at the core of any aspect of organization(s) and organizational life.

However, as discussed in the previous section, the polarization prevalent in today's post-truth environment jeopardizes the ability of individuals and groups to construct meaningful interactions, as it hinders the emergence of shared meanings and understandings. Interaction indeed frequently results in mutual delegitimization and communication breakdown, as different parties typically base their understandings on contrasting assumptions and facts. This poses a major challenge and suggests unforeseen implications for the life of organizations, since establishing common meanings and understandings is fundamental to all aspects of organization(s).

Investigating this puzzle, my dissertation explores how post-truth polarization, with its characteristic feature of inter-group incommunicability, influences and relates to communication products such as organizing, organizations, and organizational life; in order to bringing to life the relationships existing between organization, polarization, and communication. More formally, the overarching research question guiding my Ph.D. research is:

How does post-truth polarization, affecting individuals' and collectives' ability to establish meaningful communication when holding differing views, influence and relate to organization(s) at large?

1.3 Empirical Context of Research and Outline of the Dissertation

The overarching research question guiding my dissertation explores how post-truth polarization, hindering meaningful communication among individuals and groups with differing perspectives, influences and relates to communicative products as organizations and organizational life. To explore this inquiry, I have chosen the introduction of 5G technology in Italy as the empirical context. In the following sections, I will provide a more detailed illustration of this broader empirical context.

From this overarching framework, I will then zoom in on three specific aspects that I have focused on to develop the three research papers constituting this dissertation. This process will enable me to outline the content and structure of this dissertation comprehensively.

The 5G case

The advent of 5G technology marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of mobile network technology, succeeding its predecessors, namely 1G, 2G, 3G, and 4G. While the numerical progression might imply a mere incremental advancement, 5G signifies a monumental leap forward in terms of speed, capacity, and connectivity. In fact, this technological breakthrough has a game-changing potential for various sectors as it enables the effective implementation of the Internet of Things (IoT). The IoT facilitates the interconnection of diverse technological devices, enabling seamless communication and information exchange without human intervention. The implications are profound. For instance, in healthcare, 5G enables real-time patient monitoring and remote surgery; in transportation, it paves the way for autonomous vehicles by facilitating communication between cars and infrastructure; and in public infrastructure management, it fosters the development of smart city solutions such as real-time utility monitoring and smart energy management.

The promise of 5G technology has attracted significant investments from both the private sector and governmental institutions, with regulatory frameworks being established to facilitate its development, deployment, and utilization. This enthusiasm extends beyond experts to encompass a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including passionate citizens and non-experts.

However, amidst the enthusiasm surrounding 5G, there exists also a great deal of dissent. Concerns regarding potential health hazards associated with electronic radiation emitted by 5G technology and its infrastructure have sparked concerns among a substantial segment of the global population. Despite reassurances from businesses and regulatory bodies regarding its safety, a significant part of the population in many countries opposes the proliferation of 5G, often manifesting as peaceful protests and sometimes resulting in confrontational acts, as exemplified by the attacks on 5G masts. This opposition is often fueled and sustained by the propagation of misinformation and conspiracy theories, according to journalists and commentators.

The 5G case thus provides a unique empirical context for exploring my Ph.D. dissertation research question. It encompasses a diverse array of stakeholders, ranging from telecommunications companies marketing 5G-based products to research institutions, public bodies, media outlets, and activist groups. These entities exhibit varying organizational forms and characteristics, including differences in institutionalization, power dynamics, and influence. Moreover, the nature of the 5G issue necessitates extensive interaction among these diverse organizations and the broader public. This complexity presents several intriguing points for organization-studies-based investigations, particularly within the field of organizational communication.

Additionally, the controversial nature of 5G technology, which has sparked conspiracy theories and the dissemination of fake news as extensively discussed above, makes it an ideal subject for investigating matters of polarization.

To ensure the manageability of our research, I have opted to concentrate on the introduction of 5G technology within a single country, specifically Italy. This choice is driven by Italy's reflection of broader global dynamics, evident in the diverse range of

organizations involved and the polarization of public opinion. Indeed, according to Censis research center's data, in 2021, while a majority regards 5G as a welcomed technological advancement due to its potential applications, 19.9% of Italians view 5G as a highly sophisticated tool for controlling people's minds, and 14.4% perceive it as harmful to human health[8]. These statistics highlight the significant divergence of opinion within the country, making it an excellent case study for my research purposes.

Outline of the Dissertation

Amidst the broader empirical landscape concerning the introduction of 5G technology in Italy, I focused on three specific facets. This strategic approach enabled me to address and delve into distinct and more targeted theoretical puzzles aligned with the overarching research question.

The present dissertation comprises three research papers, each dedicated to exploring these narrower aspects within the broader empirical context. Collectively, these papers examine the phenomenon of post-truth polarization and its relationships with and implications on organizing, organizations, and organizational life, so to detangle the relationship existing between polarization, organization, and communication.

Paper 1 - Post-Truth Polarization and Organizing. In the first paper of the present dissertation, titled 'Connecting to Divide: Polarization as an Exacerbation of Organizing in Social Media,' I focus specifically on anti-5G activist groups to explore how the inability to communicate with those holding different views, characteristic of post-truth polarization, emerges in the organizing of social collectives.

Existing literature often identifies social media as a primary driver of contemporary polarization (Foroughi et al., 2019), particularly citing the formation of digital bubbles — echo-chambered online spaces where like-minded individuals gather and engage in one-sided conversations — as a contributing factor. However, the precise mechanisms underlying this phenomenon remain underexplored (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). In this paper, I address this gap by examining how polarization emerges in and through organizing processes. In fact, literature suggests that both polarization and organizing are

fostered by the heightened interaction facilitated by social media. On the one hand, enhanced communication improves message circulation and coordination, effectively supporting social collective organizing (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). On the other hand, however, the enhanced communication within social media bubbles appears to be the primary driver of polarization and the subsequent inability to engage in dialogue with opposing views (Foroughi et al., 2019; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019).

In light of these contrasting effects of social media communication on social collectives, I focused on highly polarized organizations — the anti-5G activist group using a Facebook group for organization — to understand how enhanced communication on social media could simultaneously foster organizing and polarization. Through qualitative analysis of anti-5G activist group members' conversations within the Facebook group, I found that unchallenged interaction within closed social media spaces facilitates organizing by providing a coherent and structured narrative that aligns members, offering them direction and a collective identity. However, these same organizational dynamics intensify to the extent that they radicalize the group's perspectives and make them resistant to alternative viewpoints, effectively polarizing them. Indeed, the alignment was so strong that any new input was biasedly interpreted to fit the existing narrative about 5G, further reinforcing their views and radicalizing them. Additionally, any opinions challenging the dominant view were immediately dismissed and delegitimized as false or misleading due to the strong link between the group's identity and anti-5G opinions, and opponents' identity and favorable 5G opinions.

With these findings, the study contributes to the literature on social media use for organizing (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017) by shedding light on its darker implications (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020) within the framework of our polarized and post-truth society (Meyer and Vaara, 2020; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). It underscores a crucial aspect: while online organizing fosters coordination and collective action, it also harbors the potential for internal polarization within the collective. The significance of this study lies precisely in establishing a direct link between polarization and organizing. Indeed, polarization appears to be intricately linked to the intensification of organizational practices in digital

spaces. Within closed organizing environments, dynamics such as the formation of strong alignment and a shared direction can escalate to extreme levels of radicalization, group solipsism, and self-referentiality, ultimately resulting in the polarization of the collective and impeding its capacity to engage with diverse perspectives.

Paper 2 - Post-Truth Polarization and Organizations. The second paper, titled 'Seeing Through a Polarized World: A Narrative Approach to Understand Stakeholders', focuses on the struggle of establishing meaningful interaction among the various social collectives involved in the 5G case. This struggle, stemming from differing assumptions and the proliferation of alternative facts, presents a serious challenge as it impedes organizations' ability to effectively engage with their stakeholders.

Indeed, engaging with stakeholders is pivotal for its success (Holzer, 2008). Establishing fruitful relationships with them yields manifold benefits, including reputational and legitimacy gains, as well as access to valuable information (Ihlen, 2008; King, 2008; Hutt, 2010). To effectively engage stakeholders, however, conducting a comprehensive stakeholder analysis is imperative (Koschmann, 2016; Hutt, 2010). This analytical process consists of three major steps. The first step involves conducting an environmental analysis to identify the relevant social actors involved in the issue at hand. Subsequently, the second step, the understanding phase, consists of comprehending stakeholders' perspectives on the issue, as well as discerning their objectives and expectations. Finally, the last step involves prioritizing stakeholders, which consists of characterizing them to determine with whom relationships should be nurtured for effective engagement and collaboration (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

In a post-truth polarized environment, wherein social collectives struggle with establishing meaningful interaction because of alternative assumptions and facts, the understanding phase of stakeholder analysis becomes significantly more critical. Indeed, achieving mutual understanding under such circumstances is often troublesome, making comprehension phase even more important.

However, while the literature extensively discusses ways to identify and prioritize stakeholders (namely, the first and third steps of the analytical process), it lacks

approaches focusing on understanding stakeholders' perspectives, expectations, and goals related to the issue (Mitchell and Lee, 2017). Recognizing the increasing relevance of understanding stakeholders in post-truth polarized circumstances, and the absence of a corresponding framework in the literature, this paper develops an analytical framework for understanding stakeholders in such contexts.

Starting from the assumption that understandings of issues emerge in discursive processes (Bitektine, 2011; Phillips et al., 2004), it is introduced a narrative-based framework for understanding stakeholders. Narratives, defined as stereotyped and normative-driven accounts of events and human actions, are exceptional tools for sensemaking, providing definitions, foundational assumptions, characterizations of involved social actors, and their associated objectives (Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Gabriel, 2000). By analyzing the narratives surrounding the issue and identifying which narratives stakeholders embrace, managers can obtain a comprehensive account of each stakeholder's perspective on the issue. This is achieved through a narrative-based framework entailing three steps - Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue, Detecting the Reproduced Narratives, and Extracting Information from the Narratives to Understand Stakeholders – and the paper illustrates them and their efficacy in understanding stakeholders in a post-truth, polarized environment by applying the framework to the analysis of the 5G-related stakeholders.

Through this analytical framework, the paper not only provide managers with a tool for stakeholder analysis but also contribute to stakeholder literature by promoting a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). Firstly, the narrative-based framework transcends a dyadic understanding of organization-stakeholder relationships, embracing the complexity of the stakeholder relationship system (Koschmann, 2016). Secondly, this framework enables a holistic analysis of stakeholders that moves beyond a focal organization-centered perspective, helping avoid biased analysis conducted solely from the viewpoint of the focal organization (Roulet and Bothello, 2022).

Paper 3 - Post-Truth Polarization and Organizational Life. The third paper, titled 'Being Responsible in a Polarized World: From Dialogical to Partisan CSR', examines the

corporate social responsibility of companies within the post-truth polarized context of the 5G case, where divergent and mutually delegitimizing interpretations of what being responsible entails exist. In other words, it explores how post-truth polarization influences organizational behavior.

This paper starts by recognizing that companies must comply with their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) — defined as stakeholders' expectations concerning the social and ethical role of companies — to succeed in the contemporary landscape.

According to the literature, a dialogical approach to CSR is the ideal way for addressing and fulfilling stakeholders' CSR-related expectations. This approach entails participating in societal conversations where various stakeholders collectively shape the concept of responsibility, enabling companies to influence, understand, and ultimately meet emerging expectations (Colleoni, 2013; Du and Vieira, 2012; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). However, in today's polarized climate, stakeholders are divided into contrasting communities with alternative viewpoints that preclude meaningful dialogue (Meyer and Vaara, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). Consequently, differing sets of stakeholders develop separate and mutually delegitimizing conversations about CSR, constructing alternative understandings of responsibility. As a result, the traditional approach of dialogue becomes impractical due to the absence of a single overarching conversation.

In the third paper, it is thus explored how companies approach CSR — i.e., how they attempt to appear responsible — when multiple and mutually delegitimizing conversations about CSR exist. To do so, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the CSR reports of major Italian telecommunication companies. In fact, these companies operate within a polarized environment regarding the social and ethical expectations stakeholders have of them. On one hand, stakeholders viewing 5G as a positive technological advancement expect those companies to act responsibly by facilitating its introduction and expansion. On the other hand, stakeholders perceiving 5G as harmful expect those same companies to behave responsibly by limiting its introduction.

The data reveal that, when confronted with mutually delegitimizing conversations about CSR, companies may adopt what I term a partisan approach to CSR. This entails

selectively engaging with one stakeholders' conversation about CSR, while ignoring and dismissing the other, rather than striving for an all-stakeholder inclusive dialogue or attempting to accommodate all perspectives. In fact, telecom companies exclusively interact with stakeholders who perceive 5G positively, while overlooking those with dissenting views. This selective engagement enables companies to reinforce favorable meanings, associating the digitalization enabled by 5G with corporate responsibility and thus positioning themselves as CSR-oriented entities.

Theoretically, this illustrates how CSR communication evolves in post-truth polarized circumstances, becoming more targeted and focused on reinforcing existing meanings rather than engaging in moral discourse. In fact, instead of negotiating moral standards with all stakeholders, as traditional CSR communication would entail, companies communicate only with those who share their views and seek to develop these meanings further. Moreover, our findings illustrate that, whereas traditionally companies sought financial and social returns by integrating or embedding CSR principles into their business models, thereby shaping them, a partisan approach suggests they may now attempt the opposite: shaping CSR meanings to align with their existing business models. Indeed, data indicate that telecom companies do not integrate pre-existing CSR meanings into their business models but instead shape CSR meanings—such as portraying digitalization as a responsibility topic—to align with their existing business models. I argue that these implications of a partisan approach may exacerbate existing polarization and ultimately dilute the meaning of CSR, blurring it across countless applications.

The next chapters consist of these three articles, which, through the case of the introduction of 5G technology in Italy, allow me to address specific research questions within the overarching question guiding this thesis. I will then proceed to draw my own conclusions. This will involve discussing how the integrated findings of my doctoral research contribute to the field of organizational studies, as well as elaborating on the broader societal implications for organizations operating in a post-truth polarized world.

2. Connecting to Divide: Polarization as an Exacerbation of Organizing in Social Media[1]

2.1 Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between organization and polarization by studying the unfolding of organizing of a highly polarized collective in social media. Social media communication is indeed simultaneously seen as a facilitator of organizing for social collectives and one of the main drivers of today's polarization. By qualitatively analyzing the interactions within an anti-5G activist group's social media bubble, we observe how group organizing also polarizes the organization. Findings suggest that unchallenged interaction in social media spaces facilitates alignment, coordination, and group cohesion. However, within such a one-sided, unchallenged, space of organizing, these organizing dynamics exacerbate, triggering polarizing behaviors that radicalize and make the group insensitive to alternative views, thus effectively polarizing it. Elaborating on the dark sides of social media use for organizing, this paper contributes to the literature by illustrating how polarization may be conceptualized as an exacerbation of organizing practices taking place in one-sided spaces such as social media bubbles, thus establishing an empirical and theoretical link between the notions of organization and polarization.

Keywords: Social Media, Polarization, Organizing, Narrative, Qualitative Study

[1] This chapter consists of a paper accepted, in its current form or an earlier version, by three academic conferences:

- NCA (National Communication Association) 107th Annual Convention: Renewal and Transformation, Seattle, 17-21/11/2021. Presented with the title: "'It feels like we're speaking different languages'" - A communication perspective on publics' opinions radicalisation and incommunicability". Authorship: Gualtieri, G.
- CSRCOM 6th International Conference: New Challenges in the Age of Digitalization and Disinformation, Lüneburg, 14-16/2022. Presented with the title: "When communication makes communicating impossible: Activists organizing in digital bubbles and the communicative constitution of post-truth's incommunicability". Authorship: Gualtieri, G. & Lurati, F.
- 40th EGOS Colloquium: Crossroads for Organizations: Time, Space, and People, Milan, 03-06/07/2024. Presented with the title: "Connecting to Divide: Polarization as an Exacerbation of Organizing in Social Media". Authorship: Gualtieri, G. & Lurati, F.

2.2 Introduction

Since the advent of social media, scholars have extensively delved into its potential for organizing, meant as the collective alignment, coordination, and structuring necessary to pursue common objectives through addressing complex and multiple tasks (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Shirky, 2008). This exploration spans various empirical contexts and disciplines, encompassing studies on social movements, activist groups (Etter & Albu, 2021; Bennett & Segerberg, 2021), political formations (Filer & Fredheim, 2016; Workneh, 2020), and institutionalized companies (Razmerita, Kirchner, & Nabeth, 2014). Overall, the literature converges on the acknowledgment that social media offers significant benefits for organizing. Specifically, it is recognized that social media's worth in organizing primarily stems from the improved in-group communication it affords to collectives (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This heightened communication may indeed foster collective alignment and coordination even without formal leadership structures, as these organizing dynamics naturally emerge through the enhanced circulation of messages within the group (Massa & O'Mahony, 2021; Castells, 2013).

However, while social media is generally viewed as a positive force for organizing, recent research indicates that its use for this purpose may also yield negative consequences (Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro, & Whelan, 2021). Studies in fact suggest that while aiding organizing efforts, social media's enhancement of in-group interaction may engender challenges for social collectives, fostering echo chambers wherein groups become increasingly polarized (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Foroughi, Gabriel, & Fotaki, 2019; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Polarization of a group consists of the radicalization of a collective around a common view reckoned as the only truth which impedes constructive dialogue with divergent perspectives (Waisbord, 2018; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018), thus potentially resulting in situations marked by uncertainty, conflicts, and misunderstandings that the influence and power of organizations (Brønn & Brønn, 2003; Tsoukas 1999) and that may erode social cohesion within broader society (Meyer & Vaara, 2020).

While the precise mechanisms underlying the polarization of collectives via social media interactions remain elusive (Meyer & Vaara, 2020; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014), extant research suggests a plausible connection to organizing practices. Indeed, both organizing and polarization seem to be fostered by the heightened in-group communication facilitated by social media (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Waisbord, 2018). In other words, while social media-enhanced in-group interaction aids members by connecting them and thus helping their organizing, it also seems to trigger the development of group polarization, hindering meaningful interaction with alternative viewpoints, and thus effectively dividing them from others.

In light of this, our study aims to elucidate how communication in social media spaces for organizing purposes may also polarize a social collective. To achieve this, we undertake a qualitative analysis of the social media interactions of an emerging organization, 'Stop 5G Italia', an anti-5G activist group utilizing Facebook groups for organizing. This case is particularly pertinent as it exemplifies a nascent organizational form, allowing for the observation of organizing as it unfolds (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019) within the context of a highly polarized discourse surrounding 5G technology. The controversy surrounding the introduction of 5G (i.e., fifth generation of internet technology) has in fact ignited considerable debate characterized by the proliferation of alternative facts, fake news, and conspiracy theories — phenomena often associated with polarization.

Our study unfolds as follows. Firstly, we delineate research highlighting the substantial advantages of social media use for organizations, emphasizing how it is the enhanced in-group communication that facilitates organizing dynamics. Subsequently, we problematize social media use by underscoring studies suggesting that heightened in-group communication also leads to group polarization. We then introduce the empirical case and outline our methodological approach. In the findings section, we illustrate how social media indeed facilitate organizing by providing spaces for unchallenged interaction, leading to the emergence of a narrative that aligns members' views, provides direction, and fosters a sense of groupness. However, we will also show how these organizing dynamics of alignment, direction, and groupness, unfolding within unchallenged spaces,

escalate to the point of triggering polarizing behaviors within the collective, resulting in the ongoing radicalization of the group and their sealing off from external challenges.

Finally, we discuss how our findings contribute to the existing literature on social media's role in organizing, particularly by elaborating on its negative externalities. We argue that our findings suggest that polarization can be understood as an exacerbation of organizing when it occurs within closed communication spaces such as those provided by social media platforms. Additionally, we elaborate on the impact of social media communication on organizational boundaries, illustrating how social-media polarization challenges the prevailing notion that views social media as inherently blurring them. We conclude by underscoring the significance of our paper in establishing an empirical and theoretical link between organizing and polarization, paving the way for further research that addresses this societal issue through an organizational lens, ultimately enriching our understanding of the polarization phenomenon and enhancing the explanatory power of organizational scholarship.

2.3 Theory

Social Media-Enhanced In-Group Communication Fostering Organizing

In recent years, scholars have underscored the significant impact of digital media, particularly social media, on the organizing capacities of social collectives (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Etter & Albu, 2021; Shirky, 2008). This examination - particularly focused on newly formed organizations and fluid forms of organizing since they allow the observation of organizing processes as they unfold (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) - let social media emerge as a pivotal "organizing agent", facilitating the development of organizational capabilities by enabling coordinated actions toward shared objectives even without the necessity of formal structures or leadership (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 14; Massa & O'Mahony, 2021; Leong, Faik, Tan, Tan, & Khoo, 2020; Castells, 2013).

Research indicates that social media indeed facilitate organizing by enabling the alignment and acceleration of collective action (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), the formalization of organizational structures (Leong, Faik, Tan, Tan, Khoo, 2020), the

expansion of influence (Tsatsou, 2018; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016), the cultivation of a sense of group identity (Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015), and the recruitment of citizens while engaging broader audiences (Murthy, 2018).

These benefits can largely be attributed to one aspect of social media - i.e., the enhanced communication opportunities they provide. Essentially, social media enhances various aspects of social collectives' organizing by improving their in-group communication (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Shirky, 2008). By offering platforms for interaction at reduced costs and facilitating the visibility and durability of members' communications (Albu & Etter, 2016), social media enhances internal communication, thereby aiding coordination, structure, and the emergence of a group identity — essential dynamic for organizing (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). As noted by Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 760), social media communication serves not only as a "mere precondition" but as an organizing principle around which organizing processes develop.

In this sense, the enhanced in-group communication facilitated by social media is even instrumental to the achievement of an organizational form for certain social collectives. The organizationality of a social collective, as recently argued, is a matter of degree rather than a binary status, and it is achieved in and through communication (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Various forms of social collectives, such as hacker communities, bike commuters' groups, or online activists, may indeed attain varying degrees of organizationality through communication practices (see Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015) by meeting criteria of collective decision-making, establishment of collective actorhood, and development of a collective sense of identity (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) — all of which can be facilitated by enhanced communication provided by social media.

Thus, social media has significantly enhanced the organizing potential of social collectives by improving their in-group communication through more efficient communication arenas that amplify the visibility and durability of their messages. This is why traditionally the introduction of social media has been viewed positively in terms of organizing. However, as we will discuss in the following section, social media, particularly the enhanced in-

group communication it provides, is also associated with negative consequences for groups — namely, polarization.

Social Media-Enhanced In-Group Communication Fostering Polarization

Contemporary society is characterized by deep polarization, wherein diverse social groups reside in isolated echo chambers unable to establish meaningful dialogue between them (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). In the past, public debates use to revolve around differing perspectives on issues, with opposing groups advocating for their viewpoints, emphasizing various aspects of the debated topics (Meyer & Vaara, 2020). However, contemporary polarization is marked by groups lacking a shared vocabulary of assumptions and facts, making dialogue impractical. In the words of Knight and Tsoukas (2019:184), certain social groups are unable to engage in dialogue due to a lack of "common frameworks of understanding", resulting in situations where different groups have "radically different facts-of-the-matter" (Meyer & Vaara, 2020:906). This extreme and irreconcilable polarization has prompted scholars and experts to speak of 'post-truth', characterizing an environment wherein traditional authorities and institutions no longer hold exclusive authority over truth (Foroughi, Gabriel, & Fotaki, 2019), and accordingly, the public sphere becomes populated by contrasting and alternative views embraced by polarized groups that see them as the only existing truth, producing a sort of inter-polarized group incommunicability (Waisbord, 2018).

Social media would play a crucial role in fostering this polarization and inhibiting communication between groups holding differing views by facilitating the formation of echo-chambered bubbles of judgment (Waisbord, 2018; Foroughi, Gabriel, & Fotaki, 2019). One notable feature of social media is in fact the ability for users to choose their social feeds, selecting sources of information and content based on personal preferences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2018). Platforms like X and Facebook enable users to choose whom and what they want to hear from, creating personalized platforms tailored to individual preferences, often without users' full awareness (Pariser, 2011). Since individuals tend to surround themselves with like-minded individuals and avoid those with differing views (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Pariser, 2011), social media fosters the

emergence of digital echo-chambered bubbles — environments where like-minded individuals gather, receive homogenous information, and engage in one-sided conversations, reinforcing homogenous views (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Stroud, 2010).

The phenomenon of digital bubbles, however, would produce polarization and the resulting social collectives' inability to communicate over the difference of opinions not by merely segregating groups physically in different spaces, but because of the communication dynamics that take place in these spaces. In fact, one-sided exposure to information alone does not fully explain polarization, as members of digital bubbles may still encounter contrasting views by chance or offline (Brundidge, 2010; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Rather, it is the communication taking place within these segregated discursive spaces that would create alternative "rules and practices [...] to define" the truth, thus impeding dialogue between different social collectives (Waisbord, 2018:9). Once individuals form opinions within these spaces, they are in fact less likely to engage with contrasting arguments and information (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Therefore, it seems to be the communication within these closed spaces that leads to polarization by establishing contrasting truths from alternative facts, hindering communication with groups holding different views (Waisbord, 2018).

Therefore, while social media-enhanced in-group communication facilitates the organizing of social collectives, studies also suggest that it may serve as a primary driver of polarization. Given that both organizing and polarization seem to be fostered by the enhanced in-group communication that social media provide, we need to address the complexities of social media's role in both organizing and polarization. Indeed, polarization is not only detrimental to organizations but also to society in general. Hence, in the following pages, we analyze social collectives' communication in social media bubbles to explore how enhanced interaction, which fosters organizing, also contributes to polarization. By doing so, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of social media use for organizing (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Albu & Etter, 2016) by investigating also its dark sides (Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro, & Whelan, 2021). In summary, this inquiry aims to shed light on the complex relationships between social media communication,

organizing, and polarization, seeking to answer the question: *How does social media-enhanced communication within social collectives, improving their organizing, also lead to their polarization?*

2.4 Methods

To explore how social media-enhanced in-group communication can simultaneously facilitate the organizing of collectives while fostering polarization, we conducted a qualitative case-based analysis, aligning with studies sharing similar objectives (Massa & O'Mahony, 2021).

In line with the theoretical framework suggesting that social media communication serves as an 'organizing principle' for newly formed organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), we adopt a constitutive view of communication to investigate this research question (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In this perspective, communication is regarded as performative, actively constructing social realities such as organizations and institutions (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019). Thus, we observe the communication among group members to understand how organizing and polarization unfold through interaction.

In the following sections, we provide insights into the empirical setting chosen for our investigation and the related data collection and analysis processes. Notably, we present data collection and analysis separately for clarity, although the two continuously overlapped throughout the process.

Empirical Setting

To answer the research question, we conducted an empirical study on an online-based activist group in the context of 5G introduction. 5G is the fifth generation of wireless technology and its launch has brought about several controversies. If the majority of the population sees the 5G as progress, parts of the population are concerned about the 5G introduction. Some are concerned regarding its potential hazard to human health, some consider 5G an attack in terms of privacy. Companies and institutions presented studies claiming that there is no evidence of negative effects of 5G technology and that its use is

strictly regulated and surveilled, but the negative sentiment around 5G did not fade out. It resulted in the formation of different anti-5G activist organizations worldwide instead, fighting to prevent and/or limit the introduction of 5G technologies. According to many commentators and opinion leaders, the view of these activist groups usually is fueled by conspiracy theories and mistrust in institutions, and often heavily rely on social media to organize (Flaherty, Sturm, & Farries, 2022).

Specifically, we studied an Italian anti-5G activist group that mainly uses a Facebook group as an organizing platform. The group is named 'Stop 5G Italia', and, at the moment we write, it comprises 25.237 members. The group was created in September 2018 to alert the population about the upcoming introduction of 5G in Italy, to promote public discussion, and to organize collective actions to obstacle the introduction of 5G technologies or to protect people from its damages (Interview, member 1).

Given that our research revolves around investigating collective organizing on social media, particularly when it results in polarization, we believe that the 'Stop 5G Italia' initiative serves as a revelatory case. First, 'Stop 5G Italia' is a suitable case for studying collective organizing on social media and, specifically, in digital bubbles. Indeed, the activist group, since its creation in 2018, almost exclusively relies on the Facebook group space to organize, growing organically on the internet, without external support from any other organization or any formal governance (Interview, member 1). Moreover, the Facebook group space exhibits structural characteristics akin to a digital bubble, functioning as a one-sided informational space where contrasting arguments and views are largely absent from the main conversation, except for occasional contributions in the comment section. In fact, those who comment with opposing opinions are often banned from the group (Interview, member 1). Secondly, the case of 5G activism is an appropriate context for investigating polarization dynamics. 5G technology has generated conspiracy theories, fake news, and mistrust in institutional fact-tellers, which are often associated with contemporary polarization dynamics (Flaherty, Sturm, & Farries, 2022). Our analysis confirms that the anti-5G group 'Stop 5G Italia' is an excellent example of polarized collectives, showing the emergence of alternative facts and truths, conspiracy theories, and mistrust in institutions within the activist group.

Data Collection

Our data collection process commenced with non-participatory observation of the 'Stop 5G Italia' group. The first author joined the group in the fall of 2020 and spent the final three months of the year scrutinizing interactions to assess their suitability for our research focus. Following this preliminary phase, the authors determined that the group provided a revelatory context for studying radical opinion-making dynamics, thus initiating data collection.

The final dataset comprises 3,900 posts and comments shared within the group, alongside three semi-structured interviews with members and additional contextual data. The latter includes 18 semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders, such as anti-5G activists, researchers, politicians, telecom managers, and journalists. Additionally, 102 articles reporting these stakeholders' perspectives on the 5G issue were incorporated.

Posts and comments were collected manually in January 2021 by downloading all available content from the Facebook group from January 2019 to December 2020, a period marked by heightened discussion on the topic. We selected posts generating a minimum of 20 comments to prioritize highly engaged discussions, ensuring our analysis encompassed topics of significant interest within the group.

Semi-structured interviews, conducted between February and April 2022, averaged 50 minutes in duration and were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 57 PDF written pages. Interviewees were selected based on their level of activity within the group, with preference given to the most active members.

Contextual data were collected within the framework of a broader project on the 5G issue. Stakeholders' interviews were conducted concurrently with those specific to this article, focusing on individuals with pertinent roles in organizations associated with the 5G debate. Verbatim transcripts of these interviews spanned 272 PDF pages. Texts reporting stakeholders' views were gathered in various formats from online sources, totaling approximately 1,560 PDF pages.

Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of our research question, we opted for an inductive, grounded theory approach to the analysis, adopting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This, indeed, was mirroring related papers (see Wilhoit & Kisselburg, 2015; Koschmann, 2013). With this analytical lens, we approached the main object of our analysis, namely the content posted on the Facebook group. We thus started isolating relevant pieces of data and grouping them according to thematic convergence.

Since the very beginning of our thematic analysis, however, it was clear that a narrative was emerging in our data. Following this insight, we decided to approach the data with a narrative analysis framework, mainly referring to the constitutive understanding of narrative (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). According to this perspective, constructing narrative is not only a way to describe and make sense of reality, but also a way to constitute it and thus to act on it. Indeed, the (causal) associations of the events that form the plot, and the characteristics and goals attributed to the involved characters create a framework that channels not only understanding but also related behaviors of those who reproduce a given narrative (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). Accordingly, we define narratives as co-constructed stereotyped and normative-driven accounts of events and human actions produced to give meaning to reality and that channel the behaviors of those who reproduce them (combined from Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). Concretely, we went through posts and comments referring to an analytical narrative framework inspired by Hardy and Maguire (2010) and Haack, Schoeneborn, and Wicker (2012), trying to identify a) the involved characters and their archetypical roles (Heroes, Villains, etc.), and b) specific goals they harbor, along with c) the (intended) actions they plan to undertake to achieve them. This process resulted in the account of a fully-fledged narrative about 5G, informing their understanding and behavior around it.

Afterward, we embraced the implications of our understanding of narrative as performative and investigated whether and how the emerging narrative was shaping activists' interaction. In other words, we analyzed data to see how the understandings and beliefs deriving from the narrative were affecting the conversation within the group. This was obtained by observing specifically the comment sections, that indeed mimic

conversational dynamics. This process resulted in the emergence of disparate dynamics within the group that we could link back to the narrative' understanding and beliefs. These disparate dynamics were then reconsidered in terms of organizing and polarization. Some of them were deemed not relevant, while others constitute the findings we are going to discuss in the next section.

The three semi-structured interviews with the activist group members were conducted in the middle of the analysis of posts and comments, mainly serving as a way to delve deeper into our understandings and emerging insights. The interviews, indeed, were a valuable tool to validate the definitions, roles, identities, and actions emerging in the posts and comments data. Also, they have been useful in explicitly verifying whether the organizing and polarization dynamics we were observing resonated with them. Lastly, interviews have also served to clarify some details regarding the group's scope, composition, and nature.

Regarding the contextual data, they were analyzed in the context of other projects on the 5G and, therefore, no quotes nor references to these data are present in this paper. However, they provided important contextual knowledge informing our broader understanding of the case and therefore contributed to validating emerging findings.

The pieces of data that will be presented in the findings section have been translated from Italian into English. To protect individuals' privacy, we anonymized every comment and/or post, assigning to each member a number. Pieces of data are therefore reported as authored by M#, where 'M' stands for "Member" and # for the corresponding number assigned to the author, together with the date on which the content has been posted. Dates follow the American standard (mm/dd/yyyy).

2.5 Findings

The communication among activists within the Facebook group remains unchallenged, indicating a lack of contrasting views entering the conversation. Our analysis reveals that this unchallenged interaction, facilitated by the social media bubble, contributes to the social collective's organizing by fostering the emergence of a structured and coherent

narrative about the 5G case. It enhances the group's organizing by aligning the groups, and by providing them a direction and a sense of unity. These organizing dynamics channel collective actions and provide them with clear actorhood in the 5G environment and a sense of collective identity, thus effectively helping the social collective to organize.

Nevertheless, data also indicate that the heightened alignment, direction, and sense of unity emerging in the unchallenged interaction not only support the organizing of the collective but also tend to trigger polarization. Our analysis indeed reveals that robust alignment, a clear sense of direction, and a solidly perceived group identity unfolding in an unchallenged one-sided communication space may escalate into polarizing behaviors. These organizational dynamics, in our data, exhibit such intensity that, on one side, leads members to biasedly interpret any new input to fit the existing narrative; on the other make members delegitimize any challenging view as purposefully misleading or manipulative – or simply false. These collective polarizing behaviors effectively polarize the collective by radicalizing the collective's position, progressively distancing them from more moderate perspectives; and by sealing them off from opposing viewpoints, making them deaf to alternative views and thus hindering constructing dialogue across the difference.

In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on the complex interplay between organizing dynamics and polarizing behaviors that we observed unfolding in the unchallenged interaction among anti-5G activists within the social media bubble.

The Emergence of the Organizing Narrative About 5G

The narrative. Within the Facebook group 'Stop 5G Italia', a collective narrative is constructed around 5G revolving around a conspiracy plot. The storyline portrays evil elites who aim to introduce 5G technology to exploit the population by controlling and manipulating them. According to some comments, 5G is intended to "make masses more manageable and vulnerable" (comment, M2, 05/07/2019) and "reduce the population [to a] flock of sheep" (comment, M3, 07/11/2019). Others suggest that it may be used to "reduce the number of people to govern them more easily" (comment, M4, 10/22/2020). The narrative suggests that the evil elites promote 5G as great progress for humankind to

conceal their secret plan (post, M5, 12/28/2019), and therefore activists conclude that ordinary people must team up to fight against its introduction (comment, M6, 10/09/2019).

By collectively constructing this narrative, they discursively define all the characters participating in the story, mimicking the common hero's journey narrative archetype, and thus presenting the hero, the villain, the servant of the villain, and constructing specific identity traits around them.

The heroes of the story are the people within the group, depicted as freethinkers who critically cast doubts on everything (comment, M7, 04/18/2020). They are described as individuals who have opened their eyes and put effort into learning more about the topic (comments, M8, 04/25/2019; M9, 11/25/2019). They are depicted as fighters who must take collective actions, such as boycotting 5G products (comment, M11, 08/26/2020), and in extreme cases, resorting to confrontational actions, such as tearing down 5G towers (comment, M12, 06/27/2019). Most importantly, they are portrayed as individuals who aim to "break the wall of lies and half-truths" (comment, M13, 06/17/2019) and awaken the apathetic "sleepy sheep" who do not yet have a strong opinion on 5G (post, M14, 09/15/2019).

The heroes fight against secret evil elites, although these villains are not unanimously identified. Some refer to powerful and merciless lobbies (comment, M15, 05/07/2019), while others name Bill Gates as their leader (comment, M16, 03/31/2020). However, they are generally referred to with general terms such as elite, powers-that-be, and the pronoun "they" (comments, M17, 18/11/2019; M18, 05/04/2020). Their goal is depicted as increasing their power by controlling the population through the introduction of 5G, which is described as "the plague" that can cause people to suffer from headaches and even death (comments, M19, 03/25/2020; M20, 03/27/2020; M21, 07/26/2019). Additionally, it is suggested that 5G will allow the elites to take "total control over the people" by, for example, manipulating "minds through sensations inducement" (comment, M22, 05/07/2019) and dehumanizing them (comment, M23, 08/20/2019).

To persuade the general public that 5G technology is synonymous with progress and to repel the efforts of the heroes, the villains require the assistance of other actors, often

incentivized by monetary gain. These villains' servants may take the form of various entities, including health institutions such as the Italian Institute of Health, which is purportedly concealing independent research revealing the hazards of 5G for human health (comment, M24, 05/31/2020). However, the most prominent collaborators of the villains are traditional media outlets and trolls, portrayed as being remunerated by the elites to manipulate the public and avoid discussing the dangers associated with 5G (comments, M25, 04/18/2020; M26, 04/30/2020). Trolls are described as professionals paid by the elites to destabilize the protagonists' convictions and foment chaos. In a post dated 09/12/2019, M27 characterizes trolls in the following manner:

"These individuals are not young or unemployed individuals who simply harass us. This is a professional enterprise. The first step is to study the group members, including their average socio-cultural level, before deciding on a debunking strategy. These individuals are skilled at debunking, often with graduate-level education, and this is their profession. They are typically in their 40s and 50s, and possess expert knowledge, as well as a thorough understanding of how to avoid detection by leveraging psychological tactics".

Narrative - An evil elite wants to introduce the deadly 5G and we must fight them			
Character	Identity/role	Goals	(Intended) Actions
Activists	Heroes	Stop 5G	Boycott/inform/confrontational actions
Sample quotes	"We go out into the midst of the people and play our part. [...] This is the moment of heroes. [...] who save everyone else's ass with moral strength." – post, M57, 08/08/2019	"The point is to avoid anything done by 5G or the Internet of Things like the plague." Comment, M16, 03/25/20	"[we should not] let anyone buy 5G terminals […] Spreading information about the harm that would result everywhere with everyone. Few terminals would mean investments with no return. A network without terminals is destined to die." – comment, M60, 02/23/2020
	"We are the last resistance to their plans" - post, M33, 05/01/2020	"We must do something to stop these criminals who want to introduce 5G." - post, M58, 05/07/2019	"The real blockade of 5G should be done by consumers not purchasing devices with this technology and refusing the 5G service offered by various providers." -post, M61, 26/08/2020
	"[Fake news and conspiracies] are labels designed to ghettoize and marginalize people who think for themselves." - comment, M39, 04/03/2020	"Our goal is to stop the installation of the '5G System'" - post, M59, 11/07/2019	"I fully share the concern about the ignorance surrounding us... it's unsettling... […] but no, […] we must inform people who are fed biased news by the media... open their eyes or we're in trouble." – comment, M62, 06/12/2020
Elite/Telecom Companies	Villains	Gaining power and money	Promoting 5G as a good thing /paying servants to promote 5G as a good thing
Sample quotes	"A new technoscientific dictatorship that sees us ignorant again and crying out, whether science says it or progress wants it, once again subservient to neo-aristocracies imposing their will on the flock without dignity and rights." - comment, M63, 10/26/2019	"The purpose of this absurd maneuver, which is becoming increasingly totalitarian and coercive, is the insane presumption of wanting to control the world and all living beings." - comment, M2, 05/07/2019	"The benefits are all for 'them', greater control, huge profits, while for us, only nonsense that they promote as 'indispensable'."– comment, M66, 06/05/2020
	"The elites really enjoy screwing people over with the very consent of the people. Only a few have realized this. It's the 'boiled frog' method taken to its highest levels." - comment, M17, 11/18/2019	"The fact is that they will control us from a single point and we will no longer be able to escape anywhere in the world, nor rebel." – comment, M64, 06/05/2020	"Indeed... there is certainly censorship... money sews the mouths of everyone: journalists, doctors, politicians, and even scientists." – comment, M67, 11/18/2019
	"I believe the objective must still be to shake up the state's leadership, the puppets who are in the pay of multinational corporations but have the arrogance and recklessness to decide solutions that will endanger people's lives." - comment, M58, 05/07/2019	"I believe there are significant military interests at play, especially. Mass control and next-generation weapons..." – comment, M65, 11/07/2019	"Evil and lies are two sides of the same coin; one cannot exist without the other. They convince us that what is good is bad and what is bad is good, that what is true is false and what is false is true, so that we ourselves can worsen things, believing that we are doing the right thing." – comment, M68, 11/15/2020
Alternative Media/Independent scientists	Heroes Helpers	Find the truth about 5G	Informing the population of 5g real essence

Sample quotes	"There are already about 120 municipalities that have said no to 5G, still few but something is moving, there are studies, and serious ones too, but unfortunately, they are independent studies so, clearly, they cannot be approved and officialized by the scientific community." – comment, M7, 04/18/2020	"I suggest […] referring to published studies (e.g., Ramazzini Institute) [to inform others]. The subject matter is complex, unfortunately." - comment, M71, 10/22/2019	"If a person uses independent thinking, they won't be fooled. Throughout Italy, there are serious and well-structured informative evenings (see Fiorella Belpoggi, Marcucci, etc.)." – comment, M73, 09/12/2019
	"Create in all municipalities a group of people who invite real experts (but not those lobbyists!), no Fastweb, Telecom, and many others... those honest ones who protect our health without thinking about profit! Consumer associations, Ramazzini Institute... etc." – comment, M69, 11/06/19	"The [mainstream] scientist [...] fundamentally, he has conflicts of interest and [to know the truth] I have to ask those who clearly do these things independently." – interview, M1.	"In terms of scientific literature, it has been known for twenty years that exposure to electromagnetic fields [...] can increase the risk of causing a series of pathologies, including tumors." - interview, M1.
	"There are certified studies on the harmfulness. Firstly, that of the RAMAZZINI center in Bologna. Inform yourselves!" – comment, M70, 04/18/2020	"5G is harmful, period. Because there have been 180 [independent] scientists who have written to 34 countries around the world that independent studies show that 5G harms health". - comment, M72, 04/10/2020	"They no longer believe in the mainstream [...] I believe more in the Bio Blu channel, which was founded with the money we all contributed. […] They have always practiced impartial journalism, they have always done journalism as it should be." – interview, M37.
Mainstream Media/Research Institutions/Trolls	Villians servants	Helping the villains in reaching their goal/making money out of the situation	Promoting 5G as a good thing /omitting bad news
Sample quotes	"We need to inform people properly about the risks of 5G. Unfortunately, the powerful entities have all the media under their control." - comment, M74, 10/06/2019	"The mainstream media often spread false news through TV and newspapers, […] who have other interests, which are those of power and financial gain, and therefore personal." - comment, M77, 04/03/2020	"Trees cut down in the name of a fictitious redevelopment of urban spaces and territories, which actually masks the intent of not hindering the propagation of wireless signals. And of course, no media talks about it." – comment, M80, 07/03/2020
	"TV was not born to provide objective information, just as poison for mice is not used to heal them. But throw it away!" - comment, M75, 05/07/2019	"They pay them, those from the TV broadcasters. Do you want them to really say what they think?" - comment, M78, 04/18/2020	"Report blatantly one-sided, biased. Since there is beginning to be talk, even critically, about 5G, the counterattack of the powerful begins. Only positive aspects of 5G are highlighted [...]." – post, M81, 05/07/2019
	"If anyone still believes in the informative power of state TV, we are in trouble... State TV […] only circulates news that suits and pleases what the state wants to achieve from citizens." - comment, M76, 05/07/2019	"Let's say that journalists who are instead sold out and corrupt are those from the mainstream newspapers absolutely, so I suppose La Repubblica and Corriere della Sera." – interview, M79.	"I realized that to defeat this group and silence us, only 2 *infiltrated* debunkers paid by a company are enough, that is, 2 paid trolls. They have technical knowledge manipulated in favor of 5G to convince you that it is harmless." - post, M36, 09/12/2019

Table 1 - Summarizing table of the narrative emerging from the unchallenged interaction within the group.

The narrative as an organizing framework. The narrative is characterized by a simple plot and provides specific identities for each actor involved. However, the narrative serves a greater purpose than merely informing the activist group's opinion on the 5G issue. The narrative also works as an organizing framework. Indeed, by telling them what the 5G is, why its introduction should be prevented, and why certain groups want to introduce it anyway, the narrative not only helps them to make sense of the 5G matter but also favors the collective organizing by providing a framework shaping behaviors and understandings (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). Indeed, narratives provide the group with a framework that channels their actions, fostering collective decision-making. Moreover, the narrative completely aligns their views and provides them with groupness, contributing to establishing an actorhood in the 5G case and collective identity.

For instance, the narrative offers guidance for collective decision-making and subsequent collective action by portraying the activist group members as heroic fighters who must resist the introduction of 5G. This directly affects their concrete actions to obstruct its introduction, guiding collective decision-making and action. For instance, the text often depicts members agreeing that to prevent the introduction of this technology, they must refrain from purchasing any 5G products and from supporting 5G companies (post, M16, 03/25/2020; comment, M28, 05/26/2019; comment, M29, 03/31/2020). Similarly, collective decision-making regarding educating people about 5G-related risks (comment, M30, 11/18/2019; post, M31, 06/17/2019) and banning trolls from the group is grounded in the narrative (comment, M1, 05/31/2020; comment, M27, 09/12/2019).

The narrative also aids activists in acquiring actorhood. By defining all the characters involved in the story, the narrative in fact distinguishes between different actors. In this sense, the narrative encourages activists to perceive themselves as a separate group from those involved in the issue, with a specific nature and purpose. Posts often show that group members are aware of their role as activists in the issue (comment, M32, 06/17/2019; post, M1, 08/10/2020). However, embracing the anti-5G narrative not only makes the members perceive themselves as having a particular actorhood in the overall 5G-related issue, it also makes other actors consider the groups as one of the specific actors involved. Frequently, in the texts, members refer to the fact that others label them as foolish conspiracy theorists

because they adopt the anti-5G narrative. For example, some lament that discussing the health hazards of 5G labels them as conspiracy theorists (post, M33, 05/01/2020). Others argue that no matter what is said, those who do not believe in the same narrative will still label them as conspiracy theorists (comment, M32, 05/11/2020). Thus, the narrative they have constructed gives them a distinct actorhood in the eyes of other actors, who, in this sense, "practically and linguistically, grant them that status" (King, Felin, Whetten, 2010: 292).

Moreover, the narrative provides the activist groups with identity traits. Indeed, the activist group members refer to themselves as freethinkers who have awakened (comment, M34, 09/15/2019) and who put effort into collecting and comprehending information about 5G (comment, M35, 06/24/2019) because they still have a "working brain", unlike the "stupid and malfunctioning" people who "do not ask questions" about anything (comment, M36, 09/12/2019; M37, 05/31/2020). Furthermore, members sometimes define themselves as "outcasts", marginalized because of their ideas (comment, M38, 11/18/2019; M39, 03/04/2020).

By providing the group with collective decision-making that directs collective action, an actorhood in the 5G landscape, and collectives' identity traits, the narrative does help them to reach organizational form by fostering organizing dynamics such as alignment, direction, and sense of groupness. However, as we are going to discuss in the next section, these organizing dynamics are so intense that end up sparking polarization as well.

Exacerbation of Organizing Dynamics into Polarization

The unchallenged interaction allows the emergence of a structured and coherent narrative. This narrative works as an organizing framework by sparking in the group key organizing dynamics such as aligning views, establishing a shared direction, and developing a sense of groupness. These organizing dynamics were facilitated by the unchallenged interaction provided by the social media bubble, which indeed enhances collective organizing.

However, we have observed that these organizing dynamics of alignment, direction, and group cohesions develop to the extreme within the closed communication space. The

unchallenged interaction has created a group so unified in their perception of truth and conviction about their actions that ultimately leads to polarization. Specifically, our data illustrates how the intense alignment, direction, and group cohesion escalate until triggering polarizing behaviors that, on one side radicalize them, and on the other seal them off from external challenges on the other, effectively polarizing them.

Organizing dynamics radicalizing the collective. The consistent reproduction of the same meaning, with little room for alternative perspectives, thoroughly aligns the members' views on the essence of the 5G case – that is, what the truth about it is. Instances where this truth is challenged are scarce, often resulting in members asserting statements akin to "If you do not concur with these points [regarding the dangers of 5G], then I suggest you exit the group" (comment, M23, 08/08/2019), or implying that "something is amiss" if one remains unaware of its potential hazards (comment, M40, 10/09/2019).

Indeed, our analysis shows that the perception of knowing the truth triggers a collective confirmation bias-like dynamic, resulting in a further radicalization of the collective's understanding and beliefs on the matter. In our analysis, we indeed observe how this alignment regarding the 5G nature tends to trigger a polarizing behavior that consists of biasedly interpreting newly acquired information, molding it to fit within the established narrative. Essentially, the alignment is so intense that leads members to manipulate any external input to conform it to the existing understanding.

We have observed numerous instances of this dynamic in the group interaction. For instance, on 11/05/2020, M41 reports in the comment section a problem he is experiencing with the Wi-Fi connection and asks whether "they" were doing some 5G-related experiments, thus showing how members tend to interpret everyday issues in a way that conforms to the existing narrative on 5G. Similarly, in a post dated 11/03/2020, M42 linked the death of her birds to a hypothetical 5G tower, stating that "we had two canaries [...] that died together in the very same moment... Did they activate some new 5G plant nearby our house?". M43 quickly posited that this was a distinct possibility, given that "birds die, bees die, the brains will maybe be cooked like in a microwave, several diseases may get worse" due to 5G.

In addition to assimilating new input into the existing framework, this biased interpretation also bolsters their existing understanding with new evidence, thereby reinforcing the group's alignment accordingly. For instance, on 10/21/2020, M44 shared news within the group about Sweden preventing a well-known telecommunication company from marketing 5G in the country. In the comment section, members celebrated the news, with M45 praising the Swedish people as "great people", while M46 emphasized that some governments "use their heads". M47 suggested that Sweden should be a "reference point" in the war against 5G, and M48 commended the Swedish people for "prohibiting the stupid, useless, and killing 5G". However, in reality, Sweden was not blocking the introduction of 5G, but simply not granting frequency rights to that particular company. A few members attempted to correct this misinterpretation of the news, but interestingly, the most dedicated ones in pointing out the error are no longer members of the group at the time of this writing. This example underscores how the biased interpretation of new inputs also serves to reinforce the narrative by supporting it with new evidence. Indeed, the (misinterpreted) Swedish case serves precisely the purpose of further legitimizing the activist group's understanding. A similar result arose from the biased interpretation of an interview with the former CEO of a major Italian telecommunications company regarding 5G technology. In the brief video, the CEO suggests that 5G will enable remote control of various systems, including medical equipment and doors. This interview became a significant source of information for members of the group. On 04/05/2020, M49 shared the interview's content within the group, stating that the CEO claimed that with 5G, they would "know who you are and where you are, always" and that they would be able to "inoculating vaccines remotely through electromagnetic radiation". The subsequent comments illustrate how this biased interpretation of the CEO's words became evidence that reinforced the narrative. M50 expresses dismay at this "sad truth" and urges people to take action, while M18 describes it as "scary" and "crazy".

Hence, there is evidence that the alignment on what constitutes the truth about the 5G case, which the narrative nurtures, triggers a polarizing behavior consisting of biasedly interpreting new pieces of information so as to fit it with the existing narrative and thus and back it up with new evidence. As a result, this contributes to the continuous

radicalization of the collective. In fact, by aligning new input within the existing organizing narrative framework, the latter is substantiated with new evidence, making it more stable and credible. This reinforcing cycle strengthens the organizing narrative framework repeatedly, bolstering the resulting alignment and eventually radicalizing further the group.

Organizing dynamic sealing off the collective. On the one hand, our data indicate that the alignment provided by the organizing narrative framework triggers a polarizing behavior among members, eventually leading to increasing radicalization of the group. On the other hand, the organizing dynamics of alignment, direction, and collective sense of self trigger a polarizing behavior which seals the activists' understandings and beliefs from any challenging views and opinions.

In our data, we observed instances where some expressed doubts or presented pro-5G opinions that contradicted the group's established beliefs. However, in such cases, instead of engaging in a conversation with them, members quickly accuse them of being purposefully misleading and manipulative with their words, leading to a breakdown in communication. This is exemplified in a conversation that occurred on 06/05/2020, where M51, who supports the idea that 5G is harmless, questioned M52: "What happens if nobody dies [because of 5G]? Where were you when everybody used to say that the 4G is harmful?". In response, M52 simply labeled M51 as a troll, effectively ending the conversation. Similarly, on 06/10/2020, M11 accused M53 of being a troll for questioning the sources of information they were referring to, and M53 responded by stating that they were simply expressing their opinion, but M11 dismissed his viewpoint, stating that they did not want to hear M53's opinion and concluding that "it is clear that you [M53] are in favor of the 5G [...]. In my opinion, if you are in this group that wants to stop it[s introduction] you are like a TROLL". This phenomenon is also evident in a comment section of a post on 10/09/2019, where some attributed major diseases and damages to 5G. M54 questioned the validity of these claims, asking how 5G could be the cause of such damages when it had not yet been introduced. M23 responded by accusing M54 of being a troll, asking if the comment was a joke.

Therefore, the expression of a contrary opinion is often met with accusations of trolling, leading to a breakdown in communication. Notably, this phenomenon is not limited to individuals but extends to institutions such as traditional media. If a news outlet releases an article or report that fails to discuss the supposed dangers of 5G or suggests that it is harmless, it is labeled a servant of the villains and dismissed as an unreliable source of information. For example, on 04/18/2020, M55 shared a post commenting on the report of a popular Italian TV program that claimed 5G is not harmful. The post continued with a hint of sarcasm, "they do not have any reason to lie if we do not consider that they display ads 24/7 for several telecommunication companies, but I guess they do so for free". In a similar vein, M56 commented, "I watched it too, and the interviewee was really reassuring. We do not have to fear this new technology… was he motivated by higher or personal interests?".

What we observe, thus, is that individuals or institutions expressing contrasting views are associated with villain-like identities, e.g. being a troll or a mouthpiece for the elite, and this pervades throughout our data. Indeed, members are aligned and coordinated around a strongly normative-driven narrative, which categorizes characters into polarized archetypes of good and evil. Consequently, individuals who embrace this narrative deem certain characters, like the heroes' helpers, as legitimate voices, while considering others, such as the villains, as untrustworthy. The alignment, direction, and sense of groupness fostered by the anti-5G narrative thus result in individuals expressing a pro-5G opinion being automatically associated with a villainous identity, thereby delegitimizing them as credible speakers. In other words, whoever is in favor of 5G is a villain and should not be listened to and possibly excluded from the interaction. As a comment posted by M23 on 09/11/2019 says, "trolls must be immediately identified and silenced! Who listens to them (and is influenced by their big words as if they were experts of electromagnetic fields) is harming our cause!". Similarly, M27 writes, "trolls must be banned, we cannot allow them to spout nonsense. Whoever denies this truth [i.e., 5G is harmful] must go away" (comment, M27, 09/12/2019). Therefore, as the organizing narrative framework constructs identities of good and evil characters based on one's stance on 5G, any dissenting opinion, along with those who express it, is delegitimized.

In this sense, the alignment, direction, and sense of groupness provided by the organizing narrative framework of the activist group are so developed that trigger a polarizing behavior consisting of delegitimizing or dismissing any challenging view as purposely misleading or manipulative. This collective behavior effectively seals their understanding and viewpoints from any challenge, as it makes communication with those who hold alternative views unconstructive, thereby preventing the exchange of contrasting ideas.

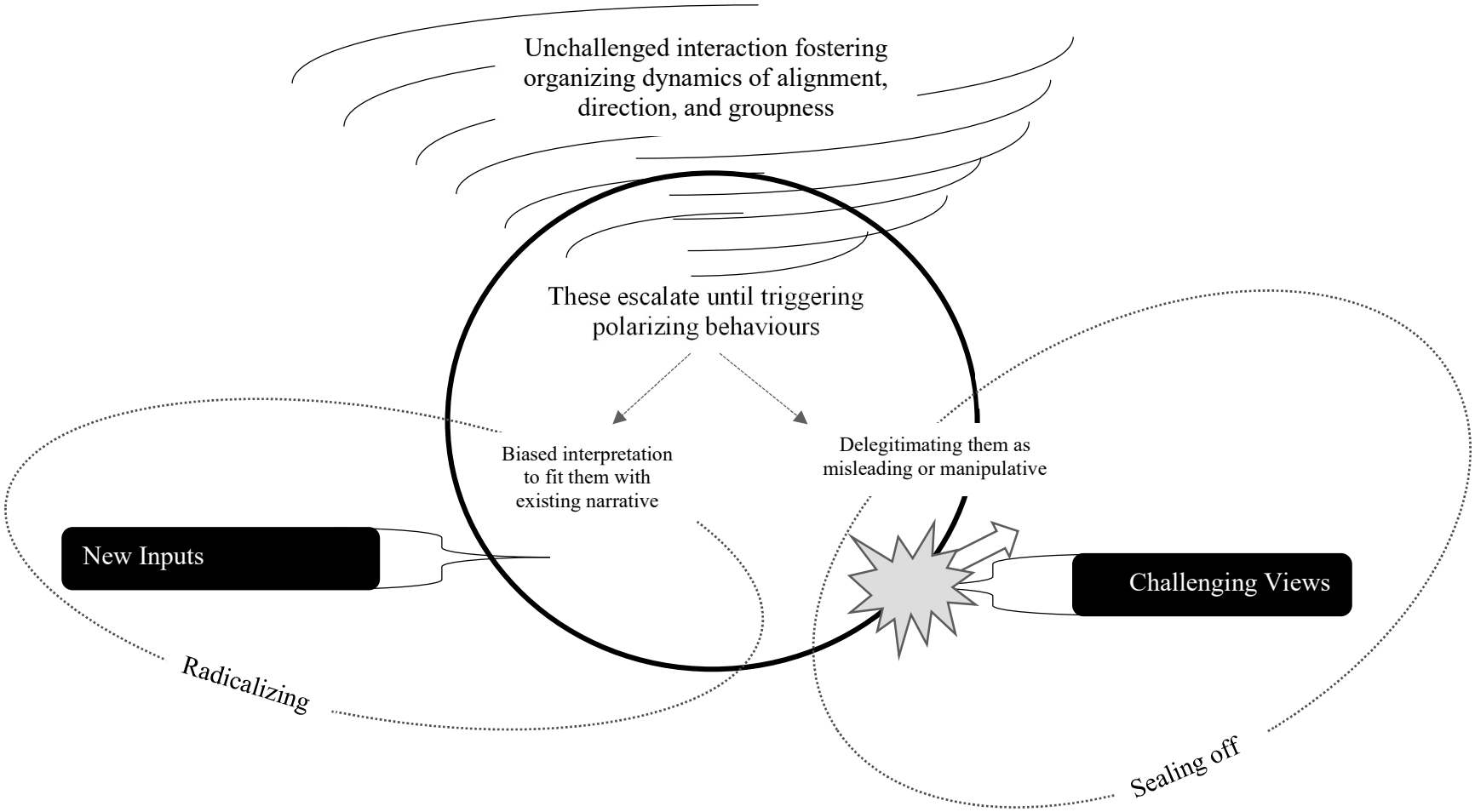

Figure 1 - Visual account of the findings. The unchallenged interaction facilitates organizing dynamics which escalate into polarizing behaviors.

As Figure 1 illustrates, we observe how the unchallenged interaction within social media bubbles facilitates the emergence of a narrative that enhances group organizing by fostering alignment, establishing a common direction, and a sense of groupness. However, these organizing dynamics escalate to the point of triggering two polarizing behaviors among members. The total alignment of the truth, clear direction, and strong sense of groupness intensify to such an extent that members a) biasedly interpret new inputs to fit existing views and b) delegitimize or dismiss any alternative views as false or misleading. These collective behaviors effectively polarize the group as on the one side these radicalize their view by reinforcing it over and over and thus moving away from moderate understandings, and, on the, other these seal off members' views from external challenges due to the strong link created between opinions and normative identities, thereby preventing dialogue with individuals holding alternative views.

2.6 Discussion

In this paper, we have analyzed the interaction within a social collective that uses social media for organizing purposes, aiming to understand how enhanced communication, which aids in organizing, may also contribute to the polarization of the group, defined here as the development of deeply rooted radical understandings and beliefs over an issue which prevent constructive dialogue with those holding alternative views.

Our findings reveal that unchallenged interaction unfolds within closed communicative spaces on social media, facilitating organizing by providing the group with strong alignment, a common direction, and a sense of unity. The absence of contrasting views allows members to co-construct a highly structured and coherent narrative about the 5G case, which aligns members' views, directs them clearly, and unifies them as a purpose-driven group with specific traits. In other words, it ignites organizing dynamics that indeed enable and foster collective decision-making, actorhood, and identity, thereby endowing them with organizational structure.

However, the organizing dynamics initiated by the narrative also polarize the group. The unchallenged interaction intensifies alignment, direction, and the sense of unity to such an

extent that these trigger polarizing behaviors consisting of, on one side, biased interpretations of any new inputs to fit within the existing framework of understanding and on the other side, of delegitimating of challenging views, perceiving individuals voicing them as intentionally misleading and manipulative. These behaviors radicalize the group's view and seal it off from alternative perspectives, effectively polarizing them. We believe that these findings make a two-fold contribution to the literature.

Polarization as an Exacerbation of Organizing Dynamics in Social Media

First, we contribute to the discourse on social media use for organizing (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Albu & Etter, 2016), elaborating on its dark sides (Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro, & Whelan, 2021) by linking it to the polarization phenomenon (Meyer & Vaara, 2020; Waisbord, 2018; Harsin, 2018).

Overall, the introduction of social media has been praised by management and organizational scholars as a useful tool for organizing, especially for newly formed or fluid forms of organization (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Indeed, research has illustrated and elaborated on the positive sides of social media use for organizing, characterizing digital platforms as facilitators. Studies show, for example, that social media helps organizing by fostering mobilizations and, accordingly, making collective actions easier (Leong, Faik, Tan, Tan, Khoo, 2020; Tsatsou, 2018), or by making participation in organizations more flexible, expanding opportunities for members to engage (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Additionally, studies show that social media may be helpful for recruiting new members (Murthy, 2018) or enhancing identification (Bartel, Van Vuuren, & Ouwerkerk, 2019). Indeed, social media are so useful for organizing that they may even organize people without them being totally aware of it (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015) and have therefore been described as organizing agents (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Arguably, all these advantages in terms of organizing that social media provide derive from the enhanced in-group communication that social media offer. Social media boost the collective's information-sharing process (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Tsatsou, 2018; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016) by making communication visible, persistent, occurring

simultaneously in multiple places, and modifiable (Albu & Etter, 2016). Consequently, the enhanced communication within collectives that social media provide may indeed work as an "organizing principle", as Bennett and Segerberg (2012:6) claim.

Our research confirms the organizing force of social media, especially for newly formed and fluid forms of organizations (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). We illustrate how social media, by providing spaces for unchallenged interaction, enhance in-group communication and facilitate the co-construction of a highly coherent narrative. This narrative, resulting from unchallenged interaction, works as an organizing principle by sparking organizing dynamics, such as aligning members' views, providing a common direction, and fostering a sense of groupness (Kuhn, 2017; Chreim, 2005; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Thus, it confirms that social media are useful for organizing because they help co-construct organizing narratives (Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011; Massa & O'Mahony, 2021).

However, our research also shows that while social media-enhanced in-group communication may be beneficial for organizing as it favors alignment, direction, and groupness, there may be circumstances wherein it may also exacerbate these organizing dynamics into polarizing behaviors. The unchallenged nature of bubbles' interaction that characterizes social collective communication using social media as organizing spaces may indeed make alignment, direction, and purpose escalate until radicalizing and sealing off the collective. On one side, in fact, these organizing dynamics may lead to the biased interpretation of new inputs to reinforce existing understandings, while on the other, they may delegitimize any challenging view by characterizing whoever expresses them as manipulative and thus untrustworthy. Consequently, groups become increasingly insensitive to new inputs and challenging views, making it impossible to communicate across differences and outside the organization, thus polarizing it.

Therefore, while past research has portrayed social media communication as a beneficial tool for organizing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Albu & Etter, 2016), we contribute to the literature by showing its side effects, arguing that the polarization of a social collective may arise from the exacerbation of organizing dynamics

in unchallenged, closed organizing spaces, such as social media bubbles. As our research shows, in closed spaces, organizing dynamics such as the development of strong alignment, a common direction, and a close sense of groupness may escalate to the point of extreme radicalization, group solipsism, and self-referentiality, ultimately polarizing the collective and hindering the ability to engage with alternative views.

Social Media Reinforcing, Rather than Blurring, Organizational Boundaries

Secondly, our research adds to the literature on social media use for organizing by illustrating that communication in the digital world may reinforce, rather than blur, organizational boundaries by triggering polarization.

Existing literature concurs that organizational boundaries are increasingly blurring due to a multitude of factors (see Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Digital media, in particular, emerges as a pivotal factor contributing to the erosion of organizational boundaries. Indeed, scholars emphasize that users of digital media, through their conversations regarding organizations online, can exert influence on key organizational facets, including identity, substance, and practices, thereby influencing the constitution of the organization itself to some extent, given the socially constructed nature of social realities like organizations (Dawson, 2018; Dawson & Bencherki, 2022). According to these contributions, digital media – together with other phenomena – amplifies the influence of external perspectives on organizations, thus further blurring the boundaries between inside and outside the organization (Dawson, 2018; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012).

However, our study shows that the narrative constructed by activists in their interactions actually helps organizations reinforce their boundaries instead. It does so by delineating organizational boundaries in the establishment of the baseline for organizational membership. Indeed, the narrative not only informs the organization's understanding of the topic but also sets a clear-cut mark of membership. In other words, the communication constructing understandings around 5G determines who can or cannot join the organization, as only those who subscribe to this narrative-based understanding of the matter may become part of the organization. In this sense, the polarization that social media spaces trigger increases the distance between those who are part of and those

excluded from the group, therefore social media happens to have a reinforcing rather than blurring role in terms of organizational boundaries. This insight challenges the notion that organizational boundaries are universally becoming increasingly blurred due to the influence of the digital realm (Dawson, 2018; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012) and posits that the impact of social media communication on organizational boundaries may also trigger the opposite dynamic. In fact, the polarization that social media may produce could accentuate an 'us versus them' divide, thus reinforcing the boundaries of the organization.

2.7 Limitations and Concluding Remarks

Our conclusions are based on a qualitative and inductive study of a single case, and we acknowledge that what we observed may be specific to our empirical setting. In fact, the characteristics of the organization chosen for the analysis, while making it revelatory for the question emerging from the discussion of the literature, are not common to a wide array of organizational forms. Indeed, the fact that the organization was formed for a specific objective – i.e., stopping the introduction of 5G – arguably makes it inherently more prone to polarization. Therefore, studying the relationship between organizing dynamics and polarization in less objective-driven organizations may be useful to expand our conclusions across different organizational forms. Moreover, our study is based on the analysis of a group using a specific social media platform, i.e., Facebook, which has specific characteristics and features. We do not exclude that the analysis of social collectives using other social media platforms to organize (such as for instance, Reddit or others) may illustrate further or slightly different polarizing dynamics based on their specific affordances. Thus, studying digital bubbles on other platforms could further enrich and expand our research as well.

Notwithstanding these limitations and ways to address them, we believe that the relevance of our study lies in its establishment of an empirical and theoretical link between organizing and the polarization phenomenon. Our data illustrate that when organizing unfolds in an unchallenged space of interaction such as social media bubbles, the emergence of alignment, a common direction, and a sense of groupness – pivotal dynamics for the organizing of a social collective – may end up radicalizing the group more and

isolating them from external inputs, thus polarizing them. In this sense, we see the polarization of a social collective as an exacerbation of its organizing dynamics.

We believe that establishing such a link opens up the way for further research that investigates polarization through an organizational lens. For example, scholars could investigate what other conditions of organizing, beyond organizing spaces that provide unchallenged interaction, may cause organizing dynamics to transcend into polarization. Moreover, it may be theoretically interesting to explore the relationship between aspects of organizing such as identification or organizational culture, and the resulting polarization of the group. Importantly, future studies may focus on understanding how this exacerbation of organizing dynamics into polarizing behaviors may be prevented. Arguably, by answering these and other questions that characterize and delve further into the relationship between organizing and polarization, we can gain a wide array of benefits. First, we could further understand when and how organizing may lead to negative consequences for the organization. Secondly, we could enhance our understanding of the social phenomenon of polarization as an organizing by-product, thus providing solutions to address this challenge while also expanding the explanatory power of our scholarship.

3. Seeing Through a Polarized World: A Narrative Approach to Understand Stakeholders[2]

3.1 Abstract

Purpose - In our polarized post-truth society, where basic assumptions about reality are no longer uniform and irreconcilable narratives emerge, companies cannot presume that the information they deem factual or the sources they view as trustworthy are universally perceived in the same manner by all stakeholders. This represents a pressing challenge to organizations in terms of stakeholder engagement, as understanding their views is a key part of the process. To address it, this paper presents a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis that focuses on the discursive processes surrounding the issue to facilitate a profound understanding of stakeholders' perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach - This paper introduces a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis through both conceptual arguments and empirical illustrations, applying the framework to the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy.

Findings - The paper illustrates how a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis enhances an understanding of stakeholders' view by revealing issue-specific sentiments and assumptions, objectives and expectations regarding other stakeholders' behaviors, and the relationships in place.

Originality - Introducing a narrative approach to understanding stakeholders' perspectives fills a gap in the stakeholder analysis literature. This proves valuable for managers and is conceptually relevant, fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking in the post-truth era.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement, Stakeholder Analysis, Post-Truth, Narrative

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[2] This chapter consists of the paper in review at Journal of Communication Management. Currently, the paper is about to be resubmitted after receiving a 'Revise and Resubmit'. Authorship: Gualtieri, G. & Lurati, F.

3.2 Introduction

The introduction of 5G technologies promises transformative advancements across various sectors, including business, healthcare, and telecommunications, generating significant enthusiasm among many. However, it also raises concerns, with the primary apprehension revolving around electromagnetic radiation. In response to these concerns, numerous institutions have sought scientific input to address the issue. Collectively, these scientific reports consistently indicate a lack of evidence supporting the idea that 5G poses any inherent danger. Consequently, governments and companies have implemented communications to assure the public of 5G's safety. Notwithstanding, individuals who consider 5G dangerous attacked and set on fire more than 80 5G-related towers worldwide in 2020 alone.

In simpler terms, some people do not believe in the reported facts on 5G from companies and institutions. According to these individuals, these reports are fake news published to reassure public opinion and pursue specific interests at the expense of the population. Essentially, these people adhere to their own collection of facts and alternative sources, resulting in their distinct truth.

In general, the 5G case, and especially the anti-5G discourse, is often associated with conspiracy theories, fake news, and the overarching notion of the "post-truth society" (Ihlen *et al.*, 2019, p.3), illustrating the new configuration of today's contrast of opinion. Indeed, while differing views on the same issue have always existed, post-truth dynamics bring about a more profound and sharp contrast of opinions among stakeholders (Ihlen *et al.*, 2019; Lenk, 2023; Meyer and Vaara, 2020) and this, we argue, poses new challenges for stakeholder engagement.

Scholars characterize the post-truth era as a confusing communication environment in which experts and institutions have lost their standardizing influence on public opinion (Harsin, 2018; Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, individuals rely on contrasting facts and sources to form their own opinions, giving rise to alternative, irreconcilable understandings of given matters. These divergent understandings usually arise under the form of oversimplified narratives that sort out phenomena, events, and individuals into

"good and bad, friends and foes" (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019, p.144) in a "you got your truth, I got mine" fashion (Waisbord, 2018, p.14). To illustrate this phenomenon, scholars used the metaphor of people residing in 'parallel realities', stressing that the contrast of opinion no longer arises solely from different priorities or interests but from operating on distinct assumptions and fundamental beliefs (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). These dynamics create a fundamentally fragmented and polarized society (Ihlen *et al.*, 2019; Lenk, 2023) wherein companies can no longer assume that information they consider true or a source they deem trustworthy is similarly perceived by all stakeholders.

Arguably, these post-truth dynamics pose a new challenge for stakeholder engagement. Indeed, understanding stakeholders' perspectives, along with identifying and prioritizing them, is a pivotal component of the stakeholder analysis process essential for successfully engaging with stakeholders (Mitchell and Lee, 2019). In this context, the existence of sharply contrasting assumptions, differing trustworthy sources, and alternative facts informing stakeholders' narratives, and thus their views, jeopardizes the success of these understanding efforts. Therefore, without enhanced methods to delve into stakeholders' basic assumptions and beliefs informing their understanding of the issue at hand, the stakeholder engagement process is likely to falter in the post-truth era, as evidenced by the 5G case.

This paper addresses this challenge by introducing an approach to stakeholders analysis that aims to provide a deep understanding of their perspectives by focusing on the discursive processes surrounding the issue at hand. Specifically, we propose a framework that investigates the discursive processes around the issue through a narrative approach, since the emergence of irreconcilable and oversimplified narratives characterizes the opinion formation process in the post-truth era (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). To achieve this, we draw on Mitchell and Lee's (2019) notion of stakeholder analysis, focusing on the understanding phase of the process - meant as the step aiming to comprehend stakeholders' perspective on the issue to better characterize them before developing engagement activities - and on Hardy and Maguire's (2010) narrative analytical framework, defining narratives as discursive, stereotyped, and normative-driven accounts of events and human actions produced to give meaning to reality.

In the subsequent sections, the paper underscores the lack of existing approaches to stakeholder analysis in facilitating an understanding of basic assumptions and beliefs informing their perspectives. In fact, contributions in the field have predominantly focused on behavioral and cognitive dimensions to identify and prioritize stakeholders, while we assert that a more holistic comprehension of stakeholders' understanding of the matter is best achieved by considering the discursive efforts of stakeholders regarding the issue.

Subsequently, the paper advocates for the introduction of a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis to enhance the comprehension of stakeholders' understanding both through conceptual arguments and empirical illustration.

Conceptually, we argue that discursive processes should be examined through the analysis of narratives surrounding the issue and an evaluation of which narratives stakeholders embrace. Narratives, indeed, inform the fundamental contrasting understandings populating post-truth environment and contain elements capable of revealing each stakeholder's assumptions and sentiments regarding the issue, related objectives and expectations on others' behaviors, and existing relationships - thereby offering a comprehensive account of their perspective on the matter.

Empirically, we illustrate the benefits of our approach by applying it to the 5G case, showing how to practically use narratives to comprehend stakeholders' perspectives. This involves an in-context practical application of the three steps within the proposed framework: *Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue*, *Detecting the Narratives Reproduced*, and *Extracting Information from the Narratives to Understand Stakeholders*.

The paper concludes by discussing how a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis, enhancing our comprehension of stakeholders' perspective, may be beneficial not only for managers but also for contributing conceptually to stakeholder literature. Indeed, this approach adds to the field by fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking, particularly vital in our post-truth era.

3.3 Extant Frameworks and Approaches to Stakeholder Analysis in the Literature

Establishing positive relationships with stakeholders and engaging with them is crucial for the success of companies (Ihlen, 2008; Holzer, 2008). This approach offers several benefits for businesses, including the enhancement of corporate social performance, reputation, and legitimacy (King, 2008; Holzer, 2008). Moreover, it can provide informational advantages and foster innovation (Holzer, 2008; Hutt, 2010). Therefore, effective engagement with stakeholders is a key function for companies.

However, successful stakeholder engagement necessitates proper stakeholder analysis (see Koschmann, 2016; Hutt, 2010). This analysis comprises three components: stakeholder identification, understanding, and prioritization. Stakeholder identification involves scanning the environment to recognize relevant social actors who could potentially impact the company's operations in the context of a given issue. Understanding stakeholders requires the company to comprehend their issue-related perspectives, objectives, and expectations. Prioritization involves characterizing stakeholders to determine which ones should be addressed first (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

Over the years, extensive research on stakeholder analysis has made a significant contribution to the stakeholder literature. For example, Phillips (2003) proposes a stakeholder analysis framework based on the company's obligations to different groups, categorizing social actors into derivative and normative stakeholders. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest mapping stakeholders based on their recognition of problems and constraints, as well as their level of involvement. Other studies recommend analyzing stakeholders based on their cooperative or potentially threatening behavior (Savage *et al.*, 1991) or the influence they exert or are subjected to (Mariconda and Lurati, 2015). Neville and Menguc (2006) propose analyzing stakeholders based on the relationships established among them, including competing, complementary, or cooperative relationships. Similarly, Holzer (2008) suggests classifying stakeholders into passive, dominated, and divided coalitions, characterizing stakeholders based on their ability to exert pressure on organizations. Additionally, the literature suggests analyzing stakeholders according to

their attributes, such as in Mendelow's (1991) power and interest matrix or in the well-known stakeholder analysis framework by Mitchell and colleagues (1997), where their salience depends on their urgency, legitimacy, and power.

As evident, the emphasis in the key contributions to the stakeholder analysis literature centers on identifying who the stakeholders are (e.g., Phillips, 2003), characterizing them (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), and delineating their behaviors (see Savage *et al.*, 1999). These contributions thus provide crucial information for stakeholder identification and prioritization. However, the literature still lacks approaches that focus on understanding stakeholders' perspectives on the issue, including their expectations and goals related to it (Mitchell and Lee, 2017).

We argue that this gap in the literature can be addressed by developing a stakeholder analysis approach that centers on the discursive processes surrounding the issue. Indeed, while discursive processes have proven relevant in other contexts of stakeholder management - see Rhetorical Arena Theory (Johansen, 2018) and Issue Arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010) - they have not yet been fully utilized to delve into stakeholders' understanding of the issue, despite their potential for doing so.

A discursive approach is well-suited for this purpose as understandings emerge and evolve through conversations (Bitektine, 2011). In other words, the ongoing discursive reproduction of meanings is instrumental in allowing an understanding of reality to emerge (Phillips *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, the perspective on a given issue, including what is considered desirable or expected, who has a stake in the issue, and who has the power to influence others capable of acting, is essentially defined through communication and relies on actors' continuous (re)construction of meanings (Koschmann, 2016). Therefore, an in-depth analysis of discursive processes within the stakeholder system offers valuable insights into the diverse perspectives and deep understandings of the issue held by stakeholders.

Given the complexity of today's polarized and post-truth landscape (Lenk, 2023; Ihlen *et al.*, 2019), where different assumptions and alternative facts may produce irreconcilable narratives informing stakeholders' view regarding the same matter (Knight and Tsoukas,

2019; Meyer and Vaara, 2020; Foroughi *et al.*, 2019), we assert that the need to comprehend stakeholders' perspective is more pressing than ever. In the subsequent pages, we thus introduce a novel stakeholder analysis approach that focuses on the discursive processes surrounding the issue. Specifically, we employ narrative analysis to provide organizations with a nuanced understanding of stakeholders' sentiment and assumptions regarding the issue, related objectives and expectations on other stakeholders' behaviors, along with insights into the relationships in place.

3.4 A Narrative Approach to Understand Stakeholders: Conceptual Arguments

Around corporate-sensitive issues, intricate discursive processes unfold, giving rise to multiple contrasting positions (Jensen, 2002; Ihlen, 2008; Raupp, 2004). The diverse positions emanating from ongoing discursive processes crystallize in narratives about the issue (Ihlen, 2008; Jensen, 2002). Indeed, narratives are fundamental tools for making sense of and forming judgments about complex phenomena, including the identification of what and who is considered good or bad - an aspect which is particularly exacerbated in the post-truth era (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). Narratives help do so by effectively reducing complexity (Roulet and Bothello, 2022; King, 2008; Hall *et al.*, 2021) through a framework for developing a normative-driven account (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). Specifically, this framework encompasses a clear definition of the issue at hand, the introduction of involved characters through archetypical roles, and the assignment of specific goals related to the issue and (intended) actions to achieve them.

Regarding the emergence of a clear definition of the issue, we should consider that narratives are ways of organizing events and human actions in a coherent form (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). However, this coherent form of human actions and events is not value-free, but rather aims at building legitimacy and models of behaviors regarding a desired result of the situation (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Therefore, narratives always have a strong normative connotation, underlying a specific evaluation of the matter (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). In this sense, narratives always let emerge a clear and normative-driven definition of the object.

In addition to normative-driven definitions, narratives aid in comprehending phenomena by incorporating characters involved, elucidating their identities, actions, and outcomes (Gabriel, 2000). However, as narratives inherently carry a normative evaluation of events and human actions, characters are not presented neutrally. Instead, they are assigned archetypical and normative-driven roles such as heroes, villains, objects of desire, heroes' helpers, and villains' servants, establishing a Manichaean dualism between good and evil characters (Gross and Zilber, 2020; Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Gabriel, 2000). In addition to assigning archetypal roles, narratives also articulate the desired end-state, describing the goals that each character aspires to achieve in the story and the course of actions the characters plan to take to achieve them (Gabriel, 2000).

Considering that narratives encompass these essential elements, it follows that analyzing narratives related to the issue and assessing which ones stakeholders embrace and reproduce is crucial for understanding their perspective. Indeed, this analytical process yields vital information about their views, encompassing: a) the overall sentiment and assumptions about the issue, b) their objectives related to it and the expectations they have regarding others' behaviors, and c) their relationships within the context of the issue.

The sentiment and assumptions about the issue are closely linked to the definition of the issue as presented in the narrative. In narratives, the emerging definition unveils a pronounced normative connotation of the issue (Hardy and Maguire, 2010), thereby directly exposing the prevailing sentiment about it - whether positive, negative, or neutral (Chung *et al.*, 2019) - among those who reproduce it. However, it does not merely disclose the sentiment; since the definition characterizes the issue (Hardy and Maguire, 2010), it also reveals the perceived essence of the issue at hand.

Insights into stakeholders' objectives and expectations regarding the other stakeholders' behaviors are instead discerned from the goals and actions that characters have in the narratives. Narratives effectively portray each character's goals concerning the issue (Gabriel, 2000) and the intended sequence of actions to achieve those goals (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). However, when it comes to narratives about company-sensitive issues, these archetypical characters are not fictional but rather represent the stakeholders who

are relevant to the issue. In other words, the villain of the narrative is an actual social actor in the real world, as is the hero, and so on. Therefore, narratives provide insight into the specific objectives of each stakeholder and the actions they intend to take to reach the desired end-state (Golant and Sillince, 2007). Notably, as narratives disclose this information for each stakeholder involved, they not only elucidate the objectives of the stakeholder reproducing the specific narrative but also illuminate what they perceive to be the objectives of other stakeholders. In essence, narratives serve the dual purpose of informing about stakeholders' objectives and revealing their expectations regarding the behaviors of others.

Finally, the characters portrayed through archetypical roles serve to characterize the relationships among stakeholders concerning a given issue (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). Narratives, in particular, illustrate three facets of the relationships between the stakeholders reproducing them and others involved: the cooperative or competitive nature of these relationships, the dynamics of influence, and the frequency of interactions.

Narratives often introduce archetypal characters framed within a good-evil spectrum, comprising a hero's side and a villain's side (Gabriel, 2000). This allows the identification of coalitions and oppositions, as stakeholders reproducing the narrative consider allies to be those placed on the same side of the dualism, while those on the opposite side are viewed as opposition. However, the presentation of characters in archetypical roles not only reveals factions but also characterizes in-faction dynamics. Indeed, villains and heroes are typically major characters, alongside supporting characters such as heroes' helpers and villains' servants (Gross and Zilber, 2020; Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Gabriel, 2000). As narratives depict relationships among these characters based on their roles, it becomes possible to infer influence dynamics, such as whether one stakeholder has an impact on another or is perceived as untrustworthy. Arguably, stakeholders aligning themselves with the hero's side of the spectrum are likely to distrust those on the opposite side while being influenced by those on the same side. Thus, narratives characterize not only coalitions and oppositions but also the influence dynamics within and among them. Lastly, narratives' archetypical roles offer insights into the frequency of interactions. According to Roulet and Bothello (2022), stakeholders who embrace the same narrative

typically engage in more frequent and balanced interactions. In contrast, when stakeholders adopt contrasting narratives, interactions may become less frequent and more unbalanced. Thus, narratives characterize not only coalitions and oppositions and the influence dynamics among them but also the frequency of interactions among stakeholders.

In summary, the analysis of narratives surrounding the issue and the assessment of which narrative each stakeholder reproduces yield valuable insights for a profound understanding of stakeholders' perspectives on the matter. Specifically, it illustrates their issue-specific sentiment and assumptions, objectives and expectations concerning others' behaviors, and the complex relationships in place.

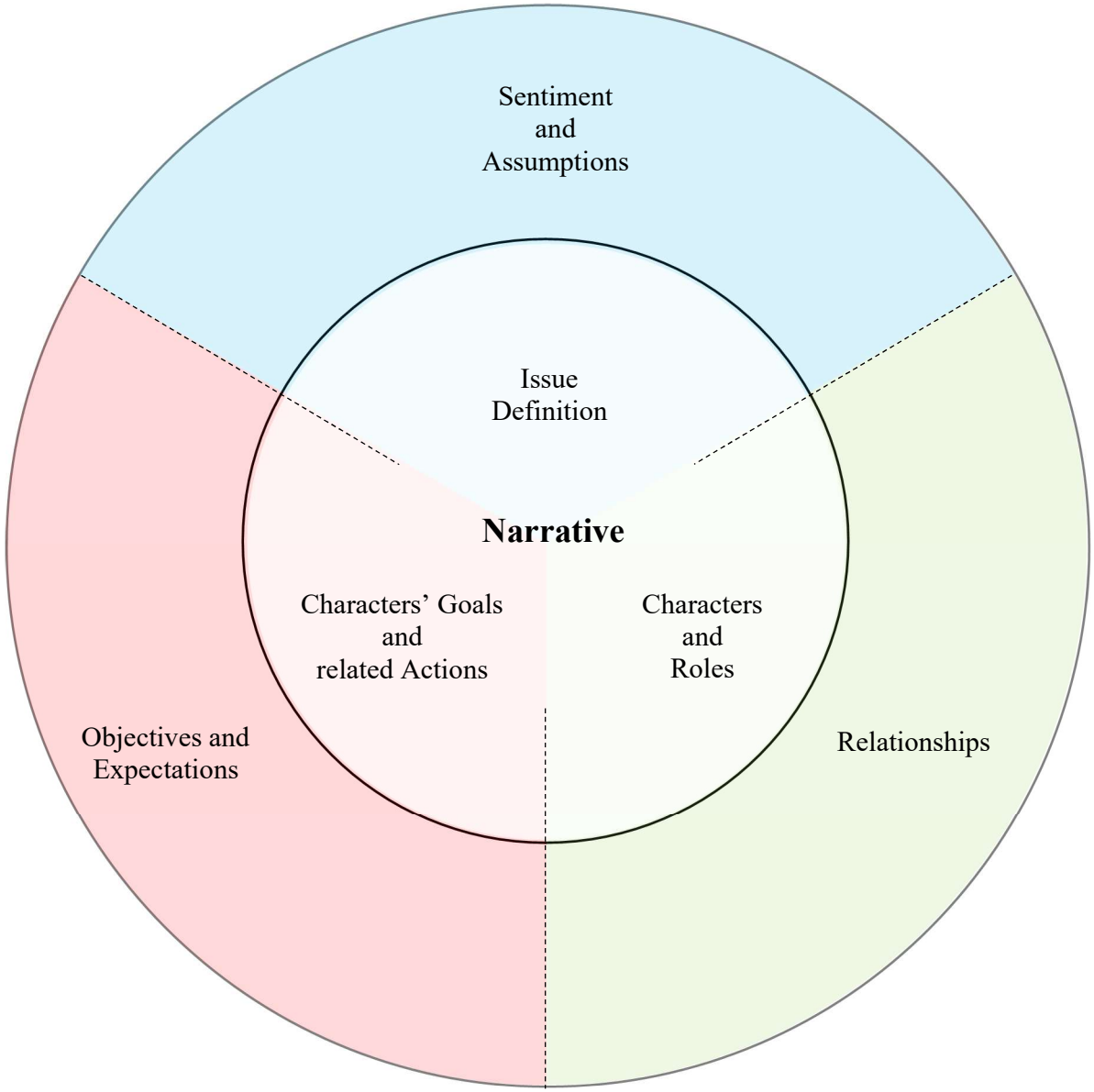

Figure 2 - A visual representation of the narrative approach to stakeholder analysis for understanding their perspectives on issues.

Collectively, this information provides a comprehensive overview of stakeholders' understanding of the matter, underscoring the potential of a narrative approach for achieving this objective within the context of stakeholder analysis. In the subsequent pages, we will illustrate the practical implementation of the proposed narrative approach by applying it to the 5G case.

3.5 A Narrative Approach to Stakeholder Analysis: Empirical Illustration

The proposed framework consists of three steps: 1) Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue; 2) Detecting the Narratives Reproduced; and 3) Extracting Information from the Narratives to Understand Stakeholders. In the following sections, we elaborate on and illustrate each step within the context of the introduction of 5G technologies.

Our selection of the 5G introduction case is deliberate given its inherently controversial nature. While many view it as a technological advancement supported by scientific studies that have not yielded concrete evidence of potential harm, a significant portion of the population harbors concerns regarding potential hazards to human health and privacy. Given the polarized opinions, resulting in the existence of contrasting narratives, the 5G issue serves as an ideal candidate for showcasing the advantages of a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis in a post-truth society.

Acknowledging its global relevance, we narrowed our focus to the introduction of this technology in a specific market, namely the Italian market, to enhance the manageability of our analysis.

Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue

The objective of the first step is to collect diverse stakeholders' voices pertaining to the issue. This necessitates an exploration of various interaction arenas linked to the issue, encompassing both traditional and digital media outlets, to pinpoint key stakeholders expressing their viewpoints on the matter. Once pivotal stakeholders are identified, all the available texts they have produced regarding the issue ought to be collected. In a snowball sampling-like fashion, when these texts reference another social actor, texts about the issue

from the mentioned social actor are also collected. This process culminates in the collection of a comprehensive corpus of texts embodying stakeholders' perspectives on the issue. Additionally, direct engagement with stakeholders through interviews may prove beneficial to procure additional material for the subsequent step in the analytical process.

This phase was executed in 2021, with a specific focus on two groups with divergent opinions on 5G: Telecommunication Companies promoting 5G-based products and Activist Organizations opposing the 5G rollout. Through the collection and analysis of their texts, our corpus expanded to include the texts of actors referenced in those texts. Consequently, texts were collected from 25 social actors, encompassing 5 stakeholder groups, namely Telecom Companies, Media Outlets, Public Institutions, Research Institutions, and Activist Organizations. Additionally, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of these groups, including 4 telecom managers, 2 researchers, 1 institutional representative, 5 journalists, and 9 activists. At the conclusion of this step, the collection of voices on the 5G issue, consisting of 116 articles and 21 interviews, totaled approximately 1,200 PDF pages.

Detecting the Narratives Reproduced

Once the voices surrounding the issue are gathered, the objective of the second step is to detect and analyze the diverse narratives reproduced. This step involves the application of a narrative analytical framework to the body of texts portraying stakeholders' perspectives on the issue, enabling the emergence of narratives and an assessment of which each stakeholder reproduces.

The analytical framework proposed is inspired by Hardy and Maguire (2010) and is employed to detect various narratives, revealing: a) the definition of the issue, b) the involved characters and their archetypical roles, and c) specific goals they harbor, along with the (intended) actions they plan to undertake to achieve them. These components collectively constitute fully developed narratives about the issue. Table 2 provides an illustration of the application of this analytical framework to the data corpus collected concerning the introduction of 5G in Italy, revealing three major identified narratives.

Interestingly, the assessment of the narratives embraced and co-produced by each stakeholder further segments the stakeholder groups identified in the previous step. While organizations within the stakeholder groups 'Telecom Companies,' 'Activist Organization,' and 'Research Institutions' consistently align with the same narratives, we had to subdivide the groups 'Public Institutions' and 'Media Outlets' into 'Public Institutions' and 'Small Public Institutions,' and 'Mainstream Media Outlets' and 'Alternative Media Outlets'. Major public institutions, such as large city municipalities or the Parliament, were found to articulate different narratives compared to small public institutions like small city municipalities. The same distinction applies to well-established mainstream magazines and journals versus smaller, media-based alternative outlets engaged in 'counter-information'.

Issue definition	Characters (**Reproducing**) – and Roles	Characters' Goals – and related Actions
5G as a Game-Changing Positive Revolution	**Telecom Companies** - Heroes	Helping Society through 5G introduction - Developing 5G-related products
	Mainstream Media Outlets - Heroes' helpers	Assisting telecom companies in introducing 5G- Informing the population about the 5G
	Public Institutions - Heroes' helpers	Assisting telecom companies in introducing 5G - Spreading 5G to make citizens' lives better off
	Research Institutions - Heroes' helpers	Assisting telecom companies in introducing 5G - Informing the population about the 5G
	Activist Organizations (No5G) - Villains	Stop 5G introduction - Misinforming and spreading their ignorance
	Alternative Media Outlets - Villain's servants	Making money or get popular through 5G fake news - Spreading false information and fueling fear
	Small Public Institutions - Villain's servants	Getting popular through 5G fake news - Listening to baseless beliefs about 5G
	Activist Organizations (No5G) - Heroes	Saving the planet and humankind from 5G - Informing about and fighting 5G introduction

5G as a Deathly Threat	**Alternative Media Outlets** - Heroes' helpers	Stop the introduction of 5G - Spreading the facts which show 5G is a threat
	Small Public Institutions - Heroes' helpers	Stop the introduction of 5G - Listening to concerned citizens
	Telecom companies - Villains	Profit and gaining control over the population - Promoting 5G as progress and lobbying for it
	Mainstream Media Outlets - Villain's servants	Profit out of 5G issue - Spreading false information about 5G harmlessness
	Public Institutions - Villain's servants	Profit out of 5G issue - Spreading false information about 5G harmlessness
	Research Institutions - Villain's servants	Profit out of 5G issue - Spreading false information about 5G harmlessness
5G as a Technology to Monitor and Use Properly	**Research Institutions** - Heroes	Clarifying nature and effects of 5G technologies - Researching about 5G effects
	Telecom companies - Villains	Profit from 5G products - Promoting only the advantages of 5G technologies
	Activist Organizations (No5G) - Villains	Stop 5G introduction - Promoting only the disadvantages of 5G technologies

Table 2 - Application of the narrative analysis framework to the 5G case in Italy.

The prevailing narrative defines 5G as a *Game-Changing Positive Revolution* and it is co-produced by Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, and Public Institutions. 5G is perceived as a revolutionary innovation that benefits individuals and businesses with assured safety (Telecom Manager 3, Telecom Companies, Interview; Journalist 1, Mainstream Media Outlets, Interview). Telecommunication Companies are thus the heroes of this story as they facilitate 5G's proliferation, crucial for Italy's economy and society (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 19/04/20). Public and Research Institutions, as well as Mainstream Media Outlets support 5G introduction, thus playing a supporting role in the narratives, acting as the heroes' helpers. Public Institutions streamline authorization processes for 5G coverage infrastructures (Italian Government, Public Institutions, 2021) and help educate the public, particularly regarding the proliferation of 5G-related fake news and disinformation (Parliamentary Document, Public Institutions, 2020). Research Institutions provide evidence-based studies disproving health concerns related to 5G (Telecom Manager 2, Telecom Companies, Interview). Mainstream Media Outlets play a vital role in disseminating accurate information about 5G (Journalist 2, Mainstream Media Outlets, Interview). Anti-5G Activist Organizations occupy the other side of the heroes-villain spectrum, baselessly associating 5G with conspiracy theories (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 12/04/20 and 17/08/21), that obstruct 5G technology's introduction. Those villains, however, are not alone. They are aided by Alternative Media Outlets that spread this 5G-related misinformation, and by Small Public Institutions that pay attention to their unbacked beliefs, thus hindering the country's technological progress (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 19/04/2020).

The second narrative portrays *5G as a Deathly Threat* and it is reproduced by Activist Organizations (No5G), Alternative Media Outlets, and Small Public Institutions. It depicts anti-5G activists as valiant heroes opposing the introduction of this technology. They argue that 5G radiation poses health risks (AIS5G, Activist Organizations, 01/20) and that serves as a tool for governments and corporations to manipulate and control the population (Activist 4, Activist Organizations, interview). In this narrative, the villains are telecommunications companies driven by profit, seemingly willing to compromise public

health for their interests (Inquinamento Italia, Alternative Media Outlets, website). Public and Research Institutions are portrayed as their allies, allegedly influenced by telecom companies to emphasize 5G's importance for progress and innovation, suggesting conflicts of interest (Activist 2, Activist Organizations, interview). Mainstream Media Outlets are implicated too, accused of spreading biased information to please advertising investors, primarily Telecom Companies (Activists 1 and 3, Activist Organizations, interviews). To counter these perceived villains and their allies, anti-5G activists are helped by Alternative Media Outlets and 'independent scientists'. The former aids by providing counter-information that depicts 5G as an "inescapable mass experiment" (Byo Blu, Alternative Media Outlets, 23/08/21), and the latter helps by conducting unbiased studies on 5G's dangers, free from Telecom Companies' funding (Inquinamento Italia, Alternative Media Outlets, website).

The third narrative presents *5G as a Technology to Monitor and Use Properly* and it is mainly reproduced by Research Institutions, who are portrayed as heroes in this minority perspective, actively researching and educating the public about 5G. They emphasize the need for ongoing research and surveillance of the technology, but assert that, as of now, no evidence supports 5G as a threat to human health or freedom. Consequently, they consider the extreme polarization in public opinion unwarranted, with the villains being those who take uncompromising stances on 5G. In other words, the researchers argue that the emotional charge in the public discussion is not aligned with the scientific evidence, creating a divide between scientific reality and public opinion (Researcher 2, Research Institutions, interview). In this narrative, anti-5G Activist Organizations opposing 5G without scientific basis are portrayed as villains, criticized for their emotional bias and singular focus on 5G's perceived drawbacks (Researcher 1, Research Institutions, interview). Telecom Companies, while less culpable, can also be seen as villains for prioritizing 5G's advantages over potential risks, driven by profit motives that might lead to downplaying safety concerns (Researcher 2, Research Institutions, interview)

Extracting Information from the Narratives to Understand Stakeholders

Once narratives have been detected and an assessment of which narrative each stakeholder embraces has been conducted, it is possible to discern stakeholders' sentiments and assumptions about the issue, their objectives and expectations of others' behaviors, as well as the relationships in place. In this section, we are going to discuss this step for two selected stakeholders, namely Telecom Companies and Activist Organizations. However, this could be applied to every stakeholder we mentioned.

Table 3 summarizes the results of the process, offering a visual representation of the information extracted from the narratives embraced by the two selected stakeholder groups. In the next paragraphs, we will discuss these results in detail for each of the two stakeholder groups individually.

Stakeholder Groups	Sentiment and Assumptions	Objectives and Expected Behaviors	Relationships					
			Coalition	Opposition	Influenced by	Not influenced by	Frequent interaction	Sporadic Interaction
Telecom Companies	Positive – 5G is part of technological evolution that ameliorates human life	Spread 5G introduction. - Public Institutions help them through infrastructures and regulations - Research Institutions help them through the production of evidence of 5G safety - Mainstream Media Outlets promote 5G advantages - Activists contrast 5G use - Alternative Media Outlets spread fake news - Small Public Institutions may rule against it	- Public Institutions - Research Institutions - Mainstream Media Outlets	- Small Public Institutions - Alternative Media Outlets - Activist Organizations	- Public Institutions - Research Institutions	- Alternative Media Outlets - Activist Organizations	- Major Public Institutions - Mainstream Media Outlets	- Small Public Institutions - Alternative Media Outlets - Activist Organizations - Research Institutions
Activist Organizations	Negative – 5G is a threat to human life and a means of control for the elite	Stop its introduction. - Alternative Media Outlets help through counter-information - Small Public Institutions listen to them - Research Institutions and Mainstream Media Outlets spread fake news - Companies hide the side-effects and dangers of their products - Public Institutions help organizations	- Alternative Media Outlets - Small public institution	- Companies - Mainstream Media Outlets - Research Institutions - Public Institutions	- Alternative Media Outlets	- Companies Media Outlets - Research Institutions - Public Institutions	- Alternative Media Outlets	- Companies Media Outlets - Research Institutions - Public Institutions

Table 3 - Summary of the results of the analytical process applied to selected stakeholders in the 5G case.

Telecom Companies. The narrative reproduced and embraced by Telecom Companies is the mainstream one, defining 5G as a Game-Changing Positive Revolution. The emerging definition thus highlights a positive sentiment about the issue. The assumption behind it is that 5G is simply seen as a part of naturally occurring technological developments, although with a potentially massive positive impact on people's lives.

Based on the idea of 5G as a Game-Changing Positive Revolution, the goal of Telecom Companies in that narrative is to spread its use by marketing 5G-based products. In the pursuit of their objective of introducing 5G, they expect Public Institutions to help them by providing infrastructure and a secure regulatory flow, Research Institutions to prove not only the technical advancement that 5G brings but also its safety, and the Mainstream Media Outlets to promote the advantages of 5G introduction. However, they also expect Activist Organizations to counter the 5G introduction either by spreading fake news or engaging in confrontational acts. Also, they expect the Alternative Media Outlets to support Activist Organizations in the spread of fake news and Small Public Institutions to listen to activists' concerns and rule accordingly.

The narrative also informs about the relationships that Companies have in place with the other stakeholders. Specifically, the presentation of involved stakeholders through archetypical roles highlights that they perceive themselves to be part of a coalition composed of Public and Research institutions, Mainstream Media Outlets, and themselves, which opposes the group that gathers Small Public Institutions, Alternative Media Outlets, and Activist Organizations. Regarding influence dynamics, Telecom Companies are influenced by both Public and Research Institutions. Public Institutions are instrumental in facilitating 5G introduction in terms of ruling and infrastructure provision, giving the latter significant influence over Companies. Research Institutions play a vital role in conducting studies that confirm 5G's safety and benefits, thus having the potential to influence companies' views on the pursuit of spreading the use of 5G technologies. The narratives also reveal that some stakeholders do not significantly impact companies' views. Activist Organizations and Alternative Media Outlets are seen as untrustworthy. Activists are considered uninformed and thus their views are not regarded as relevant, though not necessarily disingenuous. Alternative Media Outlets are viewed as primarily

driven by financial gain, making their perspectives untrustworthy and unable to influence companies' opinions. Narratives also suggest that companies' interactions are more frequent with stakeholders sharing the same narrative, such as Mainstream Media Outlets and Public Institutions. Conversely, their interaction with Activist Organizations, Alternative Media Outlets, and Small Public Institutions is sporadic or virtually nonexistent.

Activist Organizations. The narrative that this stakeholder group embraces and reproduces defines 5G as a Deadly Threat. Consequently, their sentiment towards 5G is sharply negative, assuming that the introduction of this technology is a danger to the population that only favors the interests of a few at the expense of many.

Given these premises, their goal is to impede its introduction by spreading information regarding its danger and engaging in confrontational acts if needed. In pursuing this objective, they expect to count on Alternative Media Outlets' support as informational platforms and Small Public Institutions to listen to their concerns. On the other side, they expect Telecom Companies to hide the side effects of the new technology, and Research Institutions and Mainstream Media Outlets to help the industry by spreading fake news regarding 5G safety and utility. Similarly, they expect Public Institutions to collaborate with Companies to spread the use of 5G.

Therefore, the narrative also shows what the perceived coalitions and opposition are according to the Activists Organizations. Indeed, Alternative Media Outlets and Small Public Institutions are their allies, while Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research Institutions, and Public Institutions contrast them. Regarding influence dynamics, Activist Organizations are likely to be influenced by Alternative Media Outlets activities on the matter. In fact, they share the same assumptions about 5G and therefore consider them to be a trustworthy source of information regarding it. On the contrary, Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research and Public institutions are not likely to influence activists' opinions on the matter. According to the narrative they embrace, indeed, Companies have a huge conflict of interest on 5G and therefore are not credible. The other stakeholders, instead, are not credible as they serve the Telecom

Companies, probably because they are paid to do so - according to the narrative. In terms of interaction, Activist Organizations tend to have frequent 5G-related interactions with Alternative Media Outlets, given that they share the same narrative about the topic; while they only have sporadic interactions with Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research and Public institutions as they do not embrace the same narrative.

3.6 Discussion and Conclusion

Stakeholder analysis - meant as the analytical approaches and frameworks employed to identify, understand, and prioritize stakeholders - is recognized as a pivotal element in corporate success as it enhances the likelihood of successful stakeholder engagement (Ihlen, 2008; Koschmann, 2016; Mitchell and Lee, 2019). However, while some even advocate that engaging with stakeholders involves precisely comprehending their perspectives (Hutt, 2010), existing approaches have overlooked the understanding component of the analysis (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

This gap is especially pressing, we argue, given the polarized nature of our post-truth society (Ihlen *et al.*, 2019; Lenk) wherein "common frameworks of understanding" no longer exist (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019, p. 184). In such circumstances, indeed, companies can no longer presume shared basic assumptions, making the understanding part of stakeholder analysis even more critical for the success of stakeholders engagement process.

In light of this, this paper introduces a method to understand stakeholders by focusing on discursive processes surrounding the issue. Specifically, we propose an approach that involves collecting and analyzing narratives related to the issue, and assessing which narratives each stakeholder is embracing and reproducing. This allows to identify elements of the narrative that provide a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' perspectives on the matter, encompassing each stakeholder's sentiments and assumptions about the issue, related objectives and expectations regarding others' behaviors, and their perceptions regarding the existing relationships in place.

We believe that the introduction of this approach yields both managerial and conceptual benefits.

By addressing this gap, we provide managers with a tool to assess the perspectives of other stakeholders, thereby enhancing the likelihood of constructive dialogue and thus successful engagement. In fact, engaging with stakeholders requires establishing a dialogue, and unclear fundamental assumptions and beliefs among involved parties hinder effective communication, leading to uncertainty, delegitimizing behaviors, and misunderstandings (Brønn and Brønn, 2003; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019). Therefore, engaging with stakeholders requires a profound understanding of their viewpoints (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010; Holzer, 2008), and the proposed narrative approach proves useful by offering a detailed account of assumptions and beliefs informing stakeholders' views. Indeed, for instance, it concretely sheds light on others' expectations, helping managers bridge expectations-wise gaps between organizations and stakeholders (Mitchell *et al.*, 2017). Also, it indicates the sources each stakeholder considers trustworthy, guiding managers, for example, on whether to engage directly or indirectly with stakeholders based on influence assessments. In general, understanding stakeholders' views through the narrative approach provides a nuanced characterization of stakeholders and relationships, enhancing the informational power of the overarching stakeholder analysis and, consequently, the likelihood of successful engagement. Additionally, the increased likelihood of successful engagement is not solely because understanding stakeholder perspectives improves their characterization, but also because it aids in refining stakeholder identification. Indeed, assessing which narrative each stakeholder embraces enables the further segmentation of stakeholder groups by revealing potential distinct positions within them. Our illustrative case exemplifies this, showing that for example the overarching stakeholder group "Media Outlets" ought to be subdivided into two subgroups, each endorsing opposing narratives - resulting in subsequent categorization as "Mainstream" and "Alternative" media outlets. Thus, this approach refines stakeholder identification by ensuring the cohesion of considered groups. Therefore, in summary, the narrative approach to stakeholder analysis enhances the

likelihood of successful engagement not only by better characterizing stakeholder groups but also by improving the quality of stakeholder identification.

Furthermore, from a more conceptual standpoint, we posit that the value of introducing the narrative analytical framework lies in fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking (Roulet and Bothello, 2022).

On one hand, by considering the discursive processes surrounding the issue in stakeholder analysis, we transcend the understanding of organization-stakeholder relationships as dyadic. Stakeholder ecosystems are comprised of complex networks of multiple relationships (Koschmann, 2016), and considering relationships as strictly one-to-one connections between individual stakeholders and a focal organization are reckoned problematic (Rowley, 1997; Lurati and Mariconda, 2015). Through the introduction of the narrative approach, we analyze stakeholders by considering all the relationships in place, thus embracing the complexity inherent in the existing relationships within the ecosystem. In this sense, we overcome a dyadic approach to their analysis, supporting a relational approach to the analysis of stakeholder ecosystems (Koschmann, 2016; Beaulieu and Pasquero, 2002).

On the other hand, the narrative approach nurtures a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking by placing the issue at the center of the ecosystem, rather than the focal organization. This speaks to the idea of "reconceptualiz[ing] stakeholders as being concerned with an issue rather than with a firm" (Roulet and Bothello, 2022, p. 8), suggesting that we should position the issue, rather than companies, at the core of the stakeholder system (see also Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). This orientation indeed enables companies to glean more insightful information from their analysis, including an understanding of the functions within the ecosystem or the dynamic collective organizing of different stakeholders to achieve common goals (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). By examining the narratives related to the issue to understand stakeholder perspectives, our approach treats all stakeholders equally. We thus avoid singling out any one stakeholder as the central figure in the ecosystem, aligning with the conceptual requirements we are considering.

In this sense, the narrative approach also serves as a means to avoid placing organizational assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and taken-for-granted truths at the center of the ecosystem. Indeed, organizations and managers can no longer presume that their assumptions and factual information are universally shared across the all the stakeholders as today's environments are populated with multiple and contrasting assumptions and facts (Meyer and Vaara, 2020), rendering the stakeholders ecosystems more complex than ever (Lenk, 2023; Ihlen *et al.*, 2019). To manage these intricate environments, we require approaches that recognize this complexity by analyzing the stakeholder ecosystem through a systemic approach. We believe that the proposed narrative approach to stakeholder analysis represents a step in this direction.

4. Being Responsible in a Polarized World: From Dialogical to Partisan CSR[3]

4.1 Abstract

This paper investigates how companies approach corporate social responsibility in polarized landscapes. Polarization makes the dominant dialogical approach to CSR potentially inconclusive. Indeed, companies cannot orient societal CSR meanings through an all-stakeholder-inclusive dialogue because, in a polarized world, stakeholders form alternative meanings in separate and mutually delegitimizing conversations. To understand how companies try to appear responsible under these circumstances, we examine Italian telecom companies' CSR reports issued throughout the launch of 5G technologies, a polarizing topic that sparked fake news and conspiracy theories. The findings show that, in such polarizing circumstances, companies may adopt a partisan approach to CSR, i.e., engaging with only one conversation to shape CSR views within it while ignoring the other. Through this approach, companies may further exacerbate polarization and shape CSR meanings to align with their core business, rather than the opposite. These implications, we argue, might jeopardize the very essence of CSR.

Keywords: CSR, polarization, communicative constitution of organization (CCO), fake news

4.2 Introduction

"We fight as one claiming a constitutional right, to defend our health and our lives [...]. Because 5G is a real attack on the planet". (Alleanza Italiana Stop5G,[9] 01/2020)

"Italians and the Italian economy need 5G" (La Repubblica,[10] 19/04/2020)

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[3] This chapter consists of the paper accepted for publication and now in press at Management Communication Quarterly. Authorship: Gualtieri, G. & Lurati, F.

Organizational research has shown that companies have to be perceived as responsible to succeed in the contemporary landscape (Morsing et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2013). The dominant discourse is that today's stakeholders want companies to not only be economic entities, but also contribute to societal well-being (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Accordingly, companies are expected to comply with their corporate social responsibility (CSR), referring to stakeholders' expectations of companies regarding their social and ethical role in society (Carroll, 1979; Golob et al., 2013).

To address social responsibility expectations, many companies establish a dialogue with stakeholders (see Morsing & Schultz, 2006) in order to listen, influence, and eventually meet their social and ethical expectations (Colleoni, 2013; Du & Vieira, 2012; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). In other words, companies develop a dialogical approach to CSR, which consists of establishing strategic CSR communication (Du et al., 2010) aimed at participating in the CSR conversation. Participating in this conversation, wherein different stakeholders interact to co-construct responsibility-related meanings, enables companies to see and orient CSR-related understandings, and eventually shape their activities accordingly.

Despite its popularity, the constitutive view of CSR as a set of meanings regarding the expected social and ethical behaviors of companies constituted in and through stakeholders' communicative interaction (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010) emphasizes that a dialogical approach to CSR should not be idealized (Verk et al., 2021), especially when opinions populating the stakeholders' CSR-related conversation differ. In its idealized version, the dialogical approach to CSR assumes that a coherent set of meanings about corporate responsibilities will emerge from the dialogue with stakeholders, thereby allowing companies to address these expectations by embedding them into their CSR activities (Colleoni, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, the social sphere may be populated by disparate views, such that the CSR conversation constituting CSR-related expectations may be polyphonic and messy (Castelló et al., 2013). In this sense, the CSR meanings co-constructed in this messy interaction will not converge into a set of coherent understandings (Schultz et al., 2013). Therefore, when opinions differ, meanings may not emerge as common understandings widely shared among all the stakeholders, and an

idealized form of dialogue may be inconclusive as companies would not be able to satisfy the contrasting CSR-related demands (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010).

Empirical work backs these conceptual concerns regarding the implementation of an idealized form of dialogical approach to CSR. It illustrates that, especially when the interaction constituting CSR meanings is polyphonic, companies enter the conversation not through idealized dialogical approaches, but rather by leveraging power (Shao & Janssens, 2022) or escalating the issue (Dawson & Brunner, 2020) to co-orient meanings through interaction. Therefore, the dialogical approach to CSR should not be understood as a completely democratic and enlightened exchange, but rather as a strategic discursive struggle to orient societal CSR-related meanings through "moral reasoning" (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 267). However, if the constitutive view of CSR and empirical works show that a dialogical approach should not be idealized when the social sphere is populated by different views, the polarization of today's environment may make establishing a dialogue on CSR with all stakeholders impossible.

Polarization is about the separation of the population into multiple sets of actors who hold certain views and do not establish a dialogue with one another (McCoy et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Dynamics such as mistrust in institutions and experts and the introduction of social media (Foroughi et al., 2019) have resulted in the formation of polarized sides that embrace different sets of assumptions to establish something as factual or truthful (Waisbord, 2018), thereby developing "alternative facts" and truth about the same topic (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019; Meyer & Vaara, 2020). Accordingly, they develop separate conversations that do not interact with one another in a "you got your truth, I got mine" fashion (Waisbord, 2018, p. 30). Thus, today's contrast of opinion may develop as not only a polyphonic and messy conversation, but also different and mutually delegitimizing meanings constituted in separate conversations that do not interact with each other. In this sense, any sort of overarching all-inclusive stakeholder dialogue about CSR—whether idealized or not—seems inapplicable for companies under polarized circumstances, as one overarching CSR conversation in which all stakeholders interact to co-construct corporate responsibility-related meanings cannot exist.

Although recent studies have illustrated companies' dialogical strategies adopted when multiple opinions populate the stakeholders' CSR conversation, we do not know how companies approach their social responsibility when multiple conversations about the social roles of business develop separately in society, thereby making establishing an all-stakeholder dialogue impossible. In this paper, we explore how companies try to appear responsible under these circumstances by focusing on their communication efforts to understand how they engage with mutually delegitimizing conversations about CSR. More specifically, we ask: *How do companies approach CSR when polarization produces separate and mutually delegitimizing conversations about their social responsibility?*

We explore this question by investigating telecom companies' CSR approach during the years in which 5G technologies were introduced. The case provides a useful context in which to study the repercussions of polarization. For some parts of the population, 5G technologies represent great progress for humankind; for others, they represent a major threat. Whereas the former believe that 5G will bring about several advantages such as the development of driverless cars and smart cities, the latter think that 5G is a means of control and a concrete threat to the health and livelihood of people. Both sides embrace alternative facts and believe that the opposite opinion is based on fake news and misinformation. Consequently, no constructive interaction exists between the two conversations about 5G.

Overall, our research shows that, in polarized environments, companies may address responsibility expectations through a partisan CSR approach. We introduce this concept to refer to an approach to CSR in which companies do not try to establish a dialogue with all stakeholders, but rather take a clear stand, endorsing one side of polarized conversations and promoting certain views within that conversation. Indeed, through our analysis, we show how companies engage with only one side of polarized conversations, ignoring the other side—whose views, facts, and assumptions barely emerged in our analysis. This novel approach to CSR in a polarized world implies a changing reach and scope of companies' CSR communication that may further polarize views and even result in shaping the very notion of CSR, allowing companies to represent their core business as CSR. We conclude that a partisan approach to CSR, potentially producing further

polarization and helping any companies' core business appear as an act of responsibility, may jeopardize the very essence of CSR, undermining its fundamental purpose of companies benefitting society.

This paper is organized as follows. We first review existing literature on CSR, problematizing any sort of dialogical approach to CSR in a polarized world. We then describe the examined case, setting, and methodological approach. Finally, we present the findings and discuss their implications.

4.3 Literature Review

The Dialogical Approach to CSR

CSR can be considered the sum of expectations that stakeholders have of organizations regarding their role in society (Carroll, 1979; Golob et al., 2013). Traditionally, research on CSR has focused on how companies could meet these demands by engaging in different ethical and social activities (Du et al., 2010). Indeed, CSR has generally been regarded as a resource to gain a wide array of benefits (Schultz et al., 2013). On one side, research has delved into the reputational and image-related advantages of addressing stakeholders' social and ethical expectations (see Du et al., 2010; McWilliams & Siegel, 2011). On the other side, research has shown how addressing these expectations helps companies gain or maintain legitimacy (Colleoni, 2013; O'Connor & Gronewold, 2013).

As engaging in strategic CSR corporate communication activities generates financial returns in the long run (Barnett, 2019; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), research has explored how companies could approach CSR, meaning how CSR communication efforts should be organized and managed to address stakeholders' social and ethical expectations. Morsing and Schultz (2006) identified three main approaches to it, which differ in the degree of stakeholder involvement. The first strategy consists of informing stakeholders about the company's CSR actions. The second strategy consists of asking stakeholders for their expectations and showing that these are integrated into the company's CSR activities. The third strategy consists of establishing a dialogue—meant as a two-way symmetrical

interaction—with all stakeholders to co-construct and co-shape the company's engagement in CSR.

Overall, establishing a dialogue with all stakeholders is considered the ideal approach to CSR. Indeed, engaging in a two-way symmetrical interaction with stakeholders to explore and co-construct beneficial actions could align corporate CSR activities with stakeholders' expectations (Colleoni, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and even influence them (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Establishing a dialogue with stakeholders helps companies recognize their expectations, reach a mutual understanding, and eventually mold their CSR activities (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

The dialogical approach to CSR is so well established in the literature that it has also been included in international CSR standards guidelines for practitioners (see GRI standards, 2022[11]). However, recent work on the ontology of CSR suggests that a dialogical approach to it should not be idealized under certain circumstances.

How Differences of Opinions Challenge an Idealized Dialogical Approach to CSR

Proponents of the dialogical approach to CSR have suggested that establishing a two-way symmetrical dialogue with stakeholders is an effective way to meet their social and ethical expectations (Colleoni, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, scholars have recently delved into the nature of CSR, and the resulting insights show that such an idealized dialogical approach may be inconclusive.

Indeed, scholars have recently investigated the ontology of the CSR notion and, building on the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) frameworks (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), conceptualized CSR as "a social construct that emerges out of communication" (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010, p. 10). In other words, the ethical and social expectations towards companies are "communicatively constituted in complex and dynamic networks" wherein "different actors such as corporations, government institutions, the media, and consumers organize and negotiate knowledge about the meaning and expectations to corporate responsibility" (Schultz et al., 2013, p. 685). The notion of social responsibility is thus constituted in the conversation about the role of

businesses in society among various social actors, including organizations (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013), which also shape CSR discourse (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) through their related communications (Christensen et al., 2013; Schoeneborn et al., 2020).

However, an understanding of CSR as constituted in interaction implies that disparate voices with different interests may partake in the conversation (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). When opinions are sharply different, the CSR conversation constituting the social and ethical expectations on businesses may be messy and polyphonic as social actors propose different views on demanded corporate responsible behaviors (Dawson & Brunner, 2020; Golob et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013). Therefore, the societal conversation about CSR can result in a dynamic and never-ending debate from which widely shared and crystallized CSR-related meanings do not emerge (Castelló et al., 2013; Christensen et al., 2013). This makes an idealized dialogical approach to CSR inconclusive, as these messy conversations do not provide companies with a consistent set of suggestions on how to comply with stakeholders' CSR expectations.

An ideal dialogical approach to CSR assumes that dialogues with stakeholders result in a coherent set of shared understandings about corporate responsible behavior. Indeed, "the co-creation of shared understandings by company and stakeholder" is "the essence of stakeholder dialogue" (Johnson-Cramer et al., 2003, as cited in Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 325). The emergence of shared understandings across stakeholders of responsible behavior is necessary for companies to identify overall concerns and address them through their CSR activities (Colleoni, 2013; Du & Vieira, 2012). Yet as we have seen, achieving consensus on CSR-related expectations may be challenging when the CSR conversation is messy and polyphonic (Schultz et al., 2013). When CSR is constituted in the interaction of disparate voices, the "dialogue with stakeholders might lead to paralyzing effects on organizations and their stakeholders, preventing them from reaching consensus and [taking] action" (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010, p. 21).

Recent works have demonstrated that companies do not approach CSR through an idealized form of two-way symmetrical dialogue when the CSR conversation lacks consensus and is characterized by contrasting opinions. Dawson and Brunner (2020), for

example, analyzed how Patagonia engaged in CSR when different views populated the conversation. Confronted with a highly debated and politicized issue, Patagonia decided on "immersion in the conflict" (p. 79)—not to establish a democratic deliberation over the issue, but rather to generate affective mobilization and politicization of the issue. In other words, they tried to show their responsibility by engaging in confrontational communication aimed at generating "heat, movement, and responses" (p. 78). Shao and Janssens (2022) illustrated how companies leverage power to shape the CSR conversation under such circumstances, showing that companies in their CSR approach can assume different archetypal roles—such as the hero, missionary, or architect—to make stakeholders feel dependent on corporations. Carlos and Lewis (2018) showed how companies may decide to engage in strategic silence when confronted with potentially contrasting reactions to their behaviors. Scherer et al. (2013) discussed manipulation strategies to shape stakeholders' legitimacy standards.

Expanding the lens to the management literature as a whole, we see that scholars have also addressed the issue of companies facing incoherent external pressure. Brunsson (1986, p. 171), for example, illustrated that companies, when confronted with inconsistent pressure, may fruitfully engage in strategic hypocrisy, which consists of "creating inconsistencies between talk, decisions, and products"; in other words, between what they claim and what they actually do. Meanwhile, Oliver (1991, p. 151) illustrated "acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation" strategies.

Hence, when contested and ever-changing meanings characterize the CSR-related conversation, companies do not establish an idealized form of dialogue about the expected role of businesses in society with stakeholders. As prior work shows, they actually lean towards more asymmetrical types of conversations, thereby corroborating "the existence of an overall tension between an idealization of the CSR stakeholder dialogue versus a realistic execution of CSR stakeholder dialogue" (Høvring et al., 2018, p. 640).

In the next section, we will problematize dialogical approaches further, illustrating how an all-stakeholder CSR dialogue seems to be impossible in today's polarized environment.

Approaching CSR in a Polarized World

A constitutive view of CSR emphasizes that an idealized dialogical approach may be problematic when the polyvocality of the conversation does not let a coherent set of meanings emerge; and prior empirical work shows that companies usually adopt less idealistic forms of dialogue-based approaches to CSR. However, today's landscape poses an even more fundamental challenge to any form of dialogical approach to CSR.

The success of a dialogical approach depends on the co-orientation towards shared understandings, which may be achieved through non-idealized forms of dialogue when the conversation is messy and polyphonic. However, the viability of adapting this approach to CSR depends on the existence of one overarching CSR conversation wherein all stakeholders interact with one another. In fact, research has suggested that the dialogical approach to CSR refers implicitly or explicitly to a Habermasian view of deliberation, in which different voices—albeit contrasting—can engage with one another in a constructive conversation about companies' behavior (Colleoni, 2013; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

The polarization of today's society, however, sometimes makes such overarching conversation impossible. Our time is characterized by an increasing mistrust in experts that makes them lose their role as the ultimate judge of the truth (Harsin, 2018). This dynamic, together with the introduction of digital technologies fragmenting the conversation, makes alternative facts and truths emerge in separate communities of beliefs or bubbles of judgments (Foroughi et al., 2019; Waisbord, 2018). The different positions, thus, do not differ simply because of contrasting framings of the issue, but rather because of differences in assumptions and facts (Meyer & Vaara, 2020). Therefore, stakeholders relying on different assumptions and facts do not share a common ground on which to construct a conversation (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019), leading conversations about CSR to develop separately in today's polarized landscape.

Despite the important contributions of papers showing how companies approach CSR through different forms of all-stakeholder dialogue when a messy and polyphonic conversation exists, we do not yet know how companies approach responsibility when CSR conversations develop separately and in opposite directions, thereby making

establishing and participating in an overarching dialogue impossible. Indeed, polarization creates a different configuration of the interaction that constitutes CSR meanings. If companies have thus far faced a messy and polyvocal conversation about their responsibilities, polarization turns this confusing conversation into (at least two) separate highly homogeneous conversations.

As Knight and Tsoukas (2019) would put it, historically the CSR conversation has been populated by contrasting voices playing the same language game—i.e., having the same framework of basic assumptions to assess whether something is true or false. In this sense, the contrasts used to be about matters of priority or interests (Meyer & Vaara, 2020). Today, the polarized sides instead establish different language games. This fundamental difference in the way they assess the factuality of claims hinders any sort of overarching conversation, as they do not share a common ground or rules to co-construct meanings (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). Indeed, by creating groups with radical views on a topic, polarization suppresses the differences within groups and decreases the ability to interact between groups (McCoy et al., 2018) by not only claiming that the other view is wrong, but also delegitimizing it (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). In other words, stakeholders can engage in dialogue with each other on CSR without considering the ongoing CSR conversation among other stakeholders and vice versa. Therefore, the polarization of opinions renders CSR expectations not only incoherent among different stakeholders, but also (a) detached in (at least two) separate CSR conversations that do not interact with one another, and (b) reliant on contrasting and mutually delegitimizing basic assumptions.

In sum, although scholars have shown the different dialogical strategies by which companies may decide to enter the CSR conversation when disparate views populate it, we do not yet know how companies approach corporate responsibility when separate and mutually delegitimizing CSR conversations exist, making an all-stakeholder dialogical approach to CSR impossible. In the study that follows, we investigate how companies try to appear responsible under these circumstances.

4.4 Methods

To answer our research question, we established a case-based qualitative analysis of companies' CSR communication. By doing so, we mimicked relatable papers in terms of both theory (Koschmann, 2013) and content (Høvring et al., 2018). In the following sections, we first describe the empirical setting and then present our approach to data collection and analysis.

Empirical Setting

To explore our question, we focus on the CSR communication of the major Italian telecom companies launching 5G-based services. The companies included in the analysis are TIM, Vodafone, WindTre, Fastweb, and Tiscali. The first four companies are the leading telecom companies operating in Italy.[12] Tiscali is a smaller entity, but highly involved in the launch of 5G.

We chose this industry as setting for our study because the introduction of 5G technologies has sparked a great polarization of public opinion. Indeed, the introduction of 5G has been linked with conspiracy theories, misinformation, and fake news. For example, some people have claimed that 5G towers would transmit viruses, linking the introduction of 5G with the simultaneous outbreak of the coronavirus.[13] In addition, 5G has been linked with a plan supposedly designed by Bill Gates to microchip and, thus, control people.[14] Because of these and other similar ideas circulating in the public sphere, alternative facts and truths emerged, resulting in the sharp polarization of opinions about 5G. Some people believe that 5G represents great progress for humankind, whereas others argue that it is a huge threat to people. Specifically, in Italy, approximately 60.4 percent of the population believe that 5G should be available everywhere as soon as possible. However, another 19.9 percent of the Italian population believe that 5G is "a sophisticated mind-controlling tool", and 14 percent consider 5G to be dangerous for human health.[15]

Both sides of the polarized debate claim to have indisputable facts on the matter, which has implications for the CSR expectations raised against telecom companies. Those who believe that 5G reflects progress and is necessary for the development of society also

believe that responsible telecom companies should facilitate its availability. However, those who believe 5G is a threat to humankind reckon that responsible telecom companies should limit the spread of 5G. Therefore, companies operating in this industry face two separate and irreconcilable views regarding their social responsibility, providing an ideal case for our investigation.

Data Collection

The data comprise telecom companies' CSR reports, semi-structured interviews with telecom managers, and interviews and articles reporting on stakeholders' views about the introduction of 5G.

As we aimed to explore companies' approach to CSR, the main object of our analysis is the CSR reports of the major telecom companies in Italy. We collected 18 CSR reports from the aforementioned companies issued from 2018 to 2021. This timeframe refers to the years in which telecom companies introduced 5G technologies in Italy and in which the polarization of opinions about it peaked. We could not collect two annual CSR reports in the considered timeframe: one from Fastweb (2019) and one from WindTre (2021). Each CSR report consists of 122.3 pages on average, constituting a 2202-paged written corpus.

We argue that CSR reports provide the most comprehensive vantage point for examining companies' approaches to CSR for four reasons. First, CSR reports furnish exhaustive accounts of companies' understandings of stakeholders' CSR expectations, explicitly signifying this comprehension through the identification of pivotal topics pertaining to their responsibility. Second, these reports explicitly portray the stakeholders with whom companies engage in dialogue and, thus, the entities influencing their CSR-related understandings and decisions (Hess, 2008). Third, the reports illustrate companies' responses to CSR concerns and/or their planned future courses of action. Lastly, the reports elucidate how companies actively participate in and try to influence the CSR conversations, given their role as the principal means of CSR communication (Lock & Seele, 2017).

As complementary data, we also conducted three semi-structured interviews with telecom managers. The interviews helped us validate our insights and interpretations regarding companies' CSR approach. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes on average. Parts of these interviews were dedicated to other research projects.

To gain a rich understanding of the overall debate and context around the introduction of 5G, we also relied on contextual data derived from 17 semi-structured interviews and 102 articles reporting on stakeholders' views about the introduction of 5G. These stakeholders include anti-5G activists, media, politicians, and research institutions. These data, unlike the telecom companies' CSR reports and the interviews with their managers, were not primarily collected for this article, which focuses on companies' CSR practices. Rather, they are part of a broader research project about 5G. Interview participants were chosen based on their roles within relevant stakeholder organizations, thereby ensuring their prominence and expertise on the matter of 5G. The articles comprise texts about 5G accessible online and produced by the stakeholder groups engaged in the 5G case. We obtained and processed them before we collected and analyzed the data for this paper (i.e., CSR reports and interviews with managers). However, none of the pieces of data reported in this paper have been used for other articles. All quotes in the paper come from the CSR reports, except for those included at the beginning of the introduction. Details are presented in Table 4.

Data source	Details	Use in the analysis
CSR reports	18 CSR reports of major telecom companies operating in Italy from 2018 to 2021 • N=3 Fastweb CSR reports (2018/2020/2021) • N=4 TIM CSR reports (2018/2019/2020/2021) • N=4 Tiscali CSR reports (2018/2019/2020/2021) • N=4 Vodafone CSR reports (2018/2019/2020/2021) • N=3 Wind3 CSR reports (2018/2019/2020)	Main object of the analysis Used to understand the CSR communication of these companies in the polarized landscape of opinion regarding digitalization
Semi-structured interviews	3 semi-structured interviews with telecom company managers • N=1 Fastweb • N=2 TIM	Complementary data Used to validate the findings emerging from the analysis of the CSR reports. Used to get a deeper understanding of specific aspects emerging from the analysis
Interviews and articles reporting other stakeholders' views on 5G	102 articles regarding 5G technology by: • 6 public institutions (N=13) • 3 research institutions (N=7) • 8 media outlets (N=64) • 3 activist organizations (N=18)	Contextual Data Used to gain a rich understanding of the overall landscape of opinions around the stake in the issue.
	17 additional interviews with members of stakeholder organizations involved: • N=2 researchers • N=1 institutional actor • N=5 journalists • N=9 activists	

Table 4 - Source, details, and use of data sets

We present the collection of data, followed by their analysis, separately for the sake of clarity. However, the methodological process was highly iterative, such that the collection of data sources and their analysis overlapped throughout.

Indeed, the initial insights regarding the polarized views on 5G and their potential impact on CSR emerged during the semi-structured interviews we conducted with relevant stakeholders of the 5G case between January and February 2022. These initial insights motivated us to conduct an interview with one of the telecom managers specifically to explore corporate views on how the contrasting opinions on 5G could affect their approach to relevant CSR activities. As the interview validated and expanded our initial interpretation, we decided to delve more deeply into the subject with the analysis of companies' CSR reports, which was carried out from April to October 2022. The two remaining semi-structured interviews with telecom managers were conducted in July and October 2022 to validate emerging findings from the CSR reports throughout the process.

Data Analysis

To analyze the telecom companies' CSR reports, we established a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, we implemented a three-step coding process inspired by Gioia et al. (2013). In the following subsections, we describe the three coding steps in detail.

Step 1. Coding 5G and Digitalization Links to CSR

The semi-structured interviews we conducted with 5G stakeholders revealed a polarized sentiment about 5G in society. Yet, some stakeholders perceived its development to be a responsibility topic. To delve into this insight, we conducted the first interview with a telecom manager and, then, approached the analysis of CSR reports with the objective of identifying any explicit or implicit links between 5G and responsibility. In this process, we observed strong connections between references to 5G, responsibility, and digitalization. 5G was frequently conceptualized as a means to achieve digitalization and, consequently, foster a more sustainable and inclusive future. We were intrigued by companies' portrayal of these controversial topics as acts of responsibility. Hence, we

expanded our coding scope to encompass all references to digitalization as a form of responsibility. Notably, we also included data related to 5G and digitalization that resonated with unsympathetic views, although these were almost missing in the reports.

In this phase, we focused on inductively coding data linking 5G and digitalization to CSR without seeking discursive dynamics or specific thematization. We coded *in vivo* whenever possible, while paraphrasing for other instances. As a result, we accumulated approximately 500 diverse codes, which broadly linked 5G and digitalization to corporate responsible behaviors. These codes spanned from statements like "we help society contribute to digital revolution" to "pandemic sparked fake news about 5G".

Step 2. Theory-free Sensemaking of the Empirical Codes

In the second phase of coding, we inductively tried to discern connections among the codes. Our aim was to identify thematic and discursive convergence by "seeking similarities and differences" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 6) among the extensive array of codes. Importantly, we deliberately refrained from incorporating any theoretical insights during this phase, aiming to leverage the "value" of "enforced ignorance of the literature" while allowing the data to speak for themselves (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 7). Specifically, we grouped empirical codes such as "5G will create a new, safer, and efficient social configuration" and "5G as an ingredient for growth and development of this country (Italy)" under broader common labels, such as "5G will make the country a better place". This process resulted in the formation of 12 distinct higher-level codes (see Table 5).

This phase involved a highly recursive process wherein we iteratively grouped, ungrouped, and regrouped the initial codes. For instance, the higher-level code "5G will make the country a better place" is not reported, as we had sorted the codes under this label in different higher-level codes ("5G development as CSR activity" and "we help the country modernize") by the conclusion of this phase.

Step 3. Progressive theory-informed abstraction of the emerging higher-level codes

After completing this categorization, we proceeded to interpret the emerging categories at a more abstract level. At this stage, we sought to identify patterns and discursive dynamics

among the higher-level codes through an increasingly theory-informed lens. This work, thus, involved considering the empirical higher-level codes from an increasingly abstract perspective and entailed the emergence of second-order themes. For instance, higher-level codes like "infrastructure-building as CSR activity" and "5G development as CSR activities" were subsumed under the second-order code "talking core business into CSR", a concept which draws from Schoeneborn et al.'s (2020) notion of formative CSR talk.

As we identified the second-order codes, we transitioned "firmly into the theoretical realm" to ascertain how these categories and their further abstraction could address our research question, illustrate the phenomenon under study, and engage with the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). These efforts prompted an iterative process from theory to data, which ultimately led to the emergence of aggregate dimensions. For instance, the second-order codes "equating digitalization to established CSR topics" and "digitalization as the objective of powerful public institutions" were aggregated under the theoretical reading of "constituting digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic". This interpretation draws from communicative dynamics rooted in the constitutive view of communication (see Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

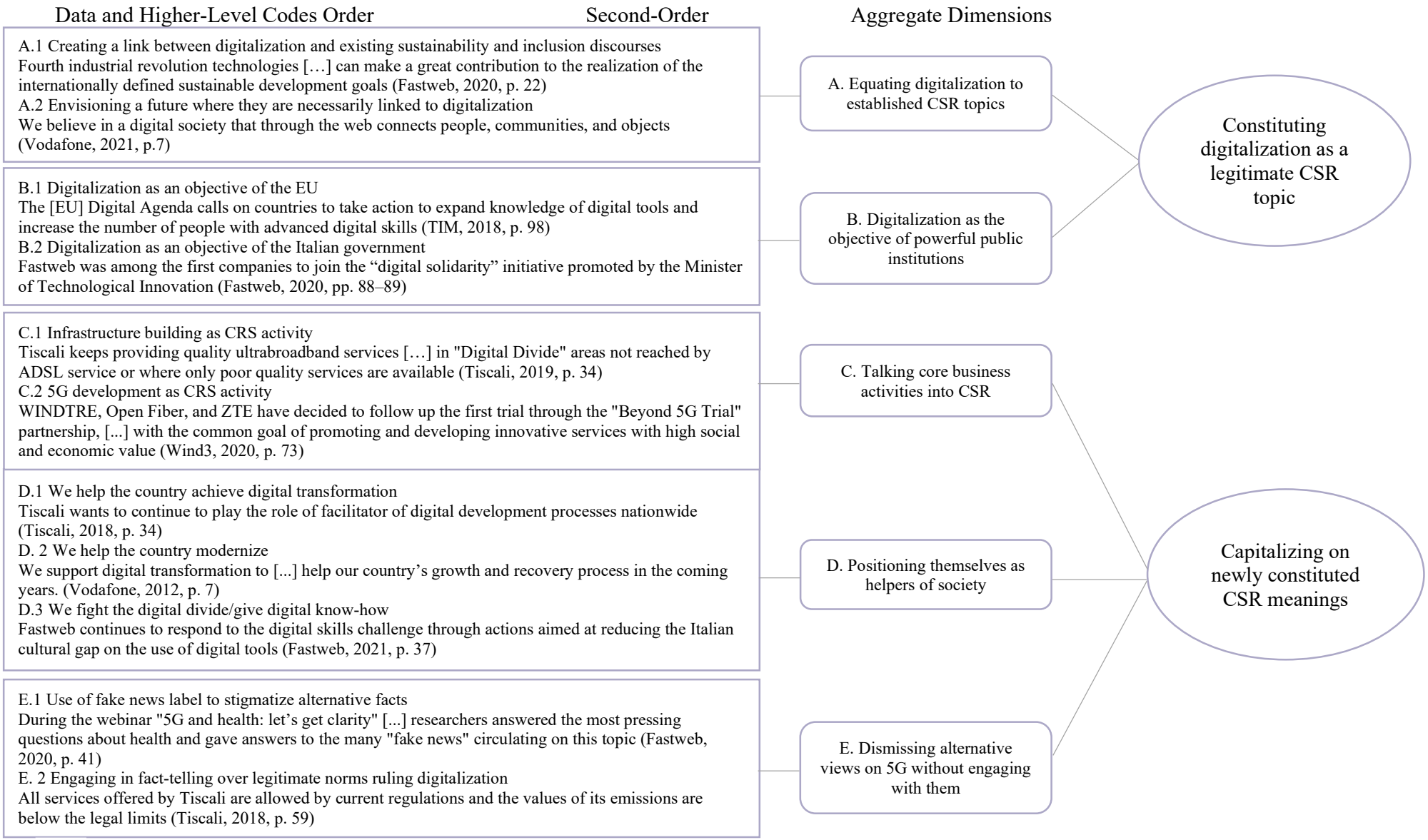

Table 5 – Data structure

Conversely, the analytical process for both the telecom managers' interviews and the contextual data did not follow a structured three-wave coding approach. They were analyzed thematically, by grouping together the relevant pieces of texts that shared the key theme (e.g., "5G-related fake news" or "importance of 5G for economy"). No theoretical abstraction was applied to these pieces of data. The categorization based on themes served as a valuable supporting tool, facilitating the generation of raw insights and contributing to clarifying and validating the analysis of the reports.

The overall understanding of the 5G debate and stakeholders' opinions gained through stakeholders' interviews and articles was useful to spark initial insights and subsequently inform and focus our interpretations of the CSR reports. Meanwhile, the interviews with telecom managers, on the one side, helped us clarify and develop initial insights and provided an overall characterization of the 5G case from the corporate point of view. On the other side, these interviews validated emergent insights gained from analyzing the CSR reports.

4.5 Findings

Our analysis focused on how telecom companies approach CSR under circumstances of a polarized landscape of opinions, wherein separate conversations about responsibility take place.

The analysis indicated that the telecom companies under investigation have adopted a similar approach to social responsibility. Overall, these companies approach CSR by referring to one of the polarized conversations and ignoring the other. Specifically, these companies refer only to those who already consider 5G to reflect progress whereas those who consider 5G to be a threat are essentially ignored. All of the analyzed reports claim that stakeholder dialogue is a crucial part of their CSR approach (see Fastweb, 2020), which the interviews also confirmed (telecom manager 1). The CSR reports presented lists of stakeholders with whom the companies established a dialogue, providing various categorizations. However, none of these lists mentioned anti-5G activists (see Tiscali, 2019). As the telecom managers told us, they did not enter into dialogues with those who

believe 5G is a threat (interviews, telecom managers 1, 2, and 3). The stakeholders with whom they engage consider 5G to be a key driver of progress and well-being.

Evidence of this one-sided engagement can also be found in the themes identified as important for stakeholders. For example, WindTre (2019, p. 128) listed the theme "5G for the future of cities" as key for stakeholders. In a similar vein, Fastweb (2020, p. 107) mentioned "5G as enabling technology", and TIM (2019, p. 38) noted "investments in 5G infrastructure development" as important themes for stakeholders. TIM also listed "electromagnetic impact" in 2019 (p. 38) and "communicating electromagnetic impact" in 2020 (p. 39), which may resonate with anti-5G sentiments. However, on the list of 17 topics, the themes ranked second to last in 2019 and last in 2020 by stakeholder relevance, whereas "investments in 5G infrastructure development" and "support the technological development" ranked fourth and first, respectively. Accordingly, TIM did not consider the electromagnetic impact to be a risk (see TIM, 2020, p. 60). Vodafone also listed "electromagnetism", but did not relate it to 5G.

As we illustrate in the following sections, alternative views of 5G being dangerous for human health were given little or no space at all in the reports. Indeed, the beliefs and opinions of the other side of the polarized conversations did not emerge in the companies' CSR communicative efforts as they tended to ignore this alternative CSR conversation going on among stakeholders that see 5G as a threat (e.g., anti-5G activists or alternative media outlets online). When these alternative views emerged, they were dismissed as fake news (see Fastweb, 2021). Thus, the reports almost exclusively referred to those already considering 5G as progress and ignored others.

References to specific social actors further reinforce this view. For example, reports referred to the EU and its Digital Agenda (Tiscali, 2019), the Italian government's strategic plans in which digitalization is key (Vodafone, 2021, p. 8), or the support for local administrations in terms of digitalization (WindTre, 2020, p. 53). Following Kuhn's (2008) notion of intertextual saturation, mentioning and voicing other social actors in companies' texts show the influence of these organizations on companies and signal that a dialogue goes on between them. At the same time, the absence of references to

institutions and organizations embracing an alternative view of expected telecom companies' CSR and their ideas signals that they had no visible influence on them and that no constructive dialogue was going on between companies and these entities. Thus, the examined companies engaged in CSR and established a dialogue only with one side of polarized opinions.

In the following sections, we show that, by relying on the dominant discourses and the positions of public institutions, telecom companies promoted a specific CSR framework of meanings. Indeed, by building on the favorable view of 5G, they constituted a new conceptualization of social responsibility that considered digitalization, as a consequence of the introduction of 5G, as a CSR topic. Telecom companies could then capitalize on these shaped CSR meanings by talking core business activities into the CSR realm, positioning themselves as helpers of society, and dismissing alternative views of 5G. We label this approach as "partisan CSR".

We next elaborate on the partisan approach to CSR by first illustrating how telecom companies constructed digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic and, then, showing how they capitalized on these shaped CSR meanings.

Constituting Digitalization as a Legitimate CSR Topic

By referring to stakeholders who have a favorable view of 5G and new technological advances, telecom companies could constitute digitalization as a CSR topic in their CSR reports. Indeed, they created a strong link between the two concepts, where 5G is the enabler of a digital revolution. In this view, 5G is built as a necessary condition to digitalize society. For example, TIM (2020, p. 82) introduced 5G as "the new telecommunications paradigm that will produce a radical evolution [...], to help the digitalization of the country". In this sense, 5G technologies will help "meet the future demands of the digital society" (TIM, 2021, p. 90). In a similar vein, Fastweb (2018, p. 34) claimed that "5G [is a] technology that promises to digitally revolutionize the way we live, produce and work". In sum, 5G is a "key asset" for the "digitalization of the country" (Vodafone, 2019, p. 15).

These companies, thus, built on the existing view of 5G to create a connection between its introduction and the digitalization of society. As they created this link, their CSR reports engaged in constituting digitalization as a CSR topic. The telecom companies achieved the constitution of digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic through two intertwined communication acts. First, the companies equated digitalization to established CSR topics such as environmental sustainability and inclusion. Second, they showed how digitalization is an objective of powerful public institutions.

Equating Digitalization to Established CSR Topics

Throughout the CSR reports, the telecom companies equated the notion of digitalization to established CSR topics, such as environmental sustainability and inclusion. They did so by creating a link between digitalization and existing sustainability and inclusion discourses and by envisioning a future where the three are necessarily linked. For example, they usually referred to digitalization as a means to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the UN to "end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity"[16]. Among these goals, climate action, the elimination of poverty, and gender equality take center stage, and several times in our data we noted how companies regarded digitalization as a means to achieve them. For instance, according to WindTre (2020, p. 97), "ICT solutions can greatly accelerate social, cultural, environmental and economic changes, becoming an extraordinary tool for the transformation envisioned by the SDGs". Fastweb (2018, p. 25) concluded that "an increase in digitalization, such as more people and connected devices, is linked to a positive increase toward achieving the SDGs". In addition, when telecom companies did not refer to specific responsibility-related external goals like the SDGs, they connected digitalization to broader CSR principles. For example, TIM (2019, p. 55) promoted "digitalization and dematerialization to achieve energy savings and reduced atmospheric CO_2 emissions".

The telecom companies also equated digitalization to established CSR topics by envisioning a future in which goals such as inclusion and sustainability are necessarily linked to the digitalization of society. For example, Fastweb (2021, p. 13) has:

a vision that puts people at the center to support everyone to participate in the future redesigned by the ongoing digital transformation. Ours is a renewed commitment that goes through the development of key infrastructure for the digitalization of the country and the pursuit of the highest standards of social responsibility and environmental sustainability....

Another example came from TIM (2021, p. 62), which claimed that digital solutions "can promote new sustainable ways of working, learning, traveling, and living". According to WindTre (2019, p. 23), "new digital technologies will help [...] establish a sustainable economic development model" in the cities of the future. Vodafone (2019, p. 3) concluded that the "transformation" brought about by 5G technologies will help them expand their "ability to create a more sustainable and inclusive digital society".

Thus, by creating a link between digitalization and existing responsibility discourses and by envisioning a future where digitalization is a necessary condition for the achievement of inclusivity and sustainability, telecom companies equate digitalization to established CSR topics.

Digitalization as the Objective of Powerful Public Institutions

Telecom companies' reports also constituted digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic by showing that it is a goal of powerful public institutions. For example, the companies referred to the European Digital Agenda, showing that digitalizing society is an explicit goal of the European Union. For instance, Tiscali claimed that:

for years, European and national policymakers have identified strategies aimed at digitalization. The Digital Agenda for Europe, in particular, defines a Europe-wide strategy to overcome digital "barriers" and create opportunities for economic, social and environmental benefits. (2019, p. 46)

Similarly, it was claimed that digitalization is "one of the major goals of [not only] the EU recovery plan" (WindTre, 2020, p. 15), but also the Italian government, as "the development of the country depends to a large extent on access to new technologies" (Tiscali, 2019, p. 46). Indeed, according to WindTre (2020, p. 14), the priority of PNRR, a strategic document defining the Italian government's recovery agenda, is "precisely

digitalization and innovation". As Vodafone (2021, p. 8) emphasized, the digitalization of society through the introduction of 5G is part of both institutions' plans: "The nationwide rollout of 5G will enable the country to meet the goals of the European Digital Compasses and will be an important pillar for many of the digitalization initiatives contained in the PNRR". According to the reports, digitalization was also a goal of local municipalities. As TIM (2019, p. 19) noted, "the promotion of digital transformation initiatives" and "the promotion of digital culture" were "among the key themes under discussion with local institutions".

In sum, telecom companies communicatively constituted the notion of digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic. They did so by equating digitalization with established CSR topics and conveying that powerful public institutions promote digitalization as their objective as well. In their reports, they shaped CSR meanings by referring to the polarized side of the population that views 5G as progress. Indeed, these reports not only supported and shared these stakeholders' views, but also built on them to constitute the broader notion of digitalization as a CSR topic.

Capitalizing on Newly Constituted CSR Meanings

In their CSR reports, the telecom companies constituted digitalization as a legitimate CSR activity, relying on existing CSR discourses and favorable views on 5G. In doing so, they were able to capitalize on these shaped CSR meanings by (a) talking core business activities into CSR (i.e., communicating core business activities as CSR activities), (b) positioning themselves as helpers of society, and (c) dismissing alternative views on 5G without engaging with them. In this section, we discuss each of these communicative acts.

Talking Core Business Activities into CSR

The constitution of digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic allowed these companies to talk their core business activities into CSR activities. In other words, the constitution of digitalization as a CSR topic legitimized their description of core business activities, such as the construction of infrastructures for telecommunication and the development of their

products (e.g., 5G technologies), as not only business-related activities, but also acts of corporate responsibility.

For instance, in the chapter "Sustainability pillars and key themes", Fastweb (2018, p. 30), stated regarding the construction of infrastructures for digitalization that one of the "key element[s] of the company's strategy is the strengthening and development of next-generation infrastructures to facilitate the digitalization of the country". Vodafone (2019, p. 37) claimed that the "growth of its mobile network infrastructure" results in "actively contribut[ing] to the growth of the social and economic fabric of Italian cities". Similarly, 5G development also became a CSR activity. Among its "[sustainability] commitments for the future", Fastweb (2020, p. 28) listed "by 2025, 90% population coverage with 5G mobile services", as they aimed to "bring the whole country to a new speed, through 5G technology" (p. 2). In its 2019 (p. 17) sustainability report, Vodafone also listed "development and deployment of new mobile 5G connections" as an objective.

As these data show, telecom companies talked their core business activities into the CSR realm, reflecting an understanding that the telecom industry is a CSR-based industry:

Telecommunications are a key pillar for economic growth and social development. The digital[ization] represents the new factor of collective progress: digital and mobile technologies are changing the way we live and work and constitute a change not only for the entire economic and productive system, but also for the social system. (Tiscali, 2021, p. 50)

Positioning Themselves as Helpers of Society

The constitution of digitalization as a CSR topic results in telecom companies' perception of themselves as a CSR-based industry whose core business activities consist of acts of responsibility. As further evidence of this perception, one of the companies under investigation, Fastweb, even "adopted the *Benefit Company* status"[17]. According to the organization issuing it, this status describes businesses that "integrate into their corporate purpose, in addition to profit goals, the purpose of having a positive impact on society and the biosphere"[18].

Given their CSR-based business status, these companies positioned themselves as helpers of society, assisting the country in achieving digital transformation. For example, Vodafone (2018, p. 9) defined itself as "digital enabler" that:

has always had a substantial and concrete influence on the progress of society. [...] This influence [has been] increasing in recent years as the company is establishing itself as an "accelerator" of digital change to create new and better opportunities for inclusion through innovative technologies.

Similarly, in a paragraph entitled "Fastweb for the country", Fastweb (2020, p. 2) claimed that their "initiatives and […] projects play a key role in accelerating Italy's digitalization"; they subsequently stated that they want to be "a reference point for accelerating the country's digitalization" (p. 25).

These companies also helped the country fight the digital divide. In the chapter "Inclusion for all", Vodafone (2018, p. 15) claimed that they "believe that the opportunities of the digital future should be accessible to everyone". Therefore, they "work to reduce inequality and facilitate access to digital skills for all generations". Another piece of evidence was provided by one of TIM's (2020, p. 3) most important CSR projects, Operation Digital Renaissance. This project stemmed from an articulated desire to "concretely address the issue of the digital skills gap in our society, because we believe that overcoming the cultural digital divide represents" one of the "challenges our country faces in terms of innovation".

However, these companies also help the country on a broader level. For instance, Fastweb (2018, p. 3) defined itself as "an entity that creates value not only for its shareholders and employees but also for the country as a whole" through its activities, including 5G development and the promotion of digital culture. The industry has also been key during emergencies:

The telecommunications industry has assumed a key role in managing the implications of the pandemic in many aspects of the economic and social system, serving as a facilitator and guarantor of business continuity and essential social rights. (WindTre, 2020, p. 12)

Dismissing Alternative Views of 5G without Engaging with Them

Finally, by establishing digitalization as a CSR topic, the telecom companies could also dismiss alternative views of 5G without engaging with them. As digitalization was framed as an act of responsibility, 5G was almost exclusively referred to as its enabler.

These companies did not argue against the views that describe 5G as a threat to human health or a means of control, which indeed barely emerged in our analysis. In the few paragraphs in the CSR reports on concerns regarding the introduction of 5G, the companies either labeled these concerns as deriving from fake news or engaged in fact-telling by pointing to the strict norms and regulations about electromagnetic emissions. Fastweb (2021, p. 52) dismissed 5G-related concerns by claiming that, "during the global pandemic, fake news about 5G spread around the world, casting doubt and instilling fears about the possible harmful effects of electromagnetic fields emitted". Meanwhile, TIM (2021, p. 63) claimed that, "although Italian regulations on electromagnetic emissions are among the most restrictive in the world, with limits much lower than the European average [...] the electromagnetic emissions generated are within the legal limits". Similarly, Vodafone (2019, p. 66) allocated two paragraphs to electromagnetism, claiming that they would design and build "all network installations in full compliance with Italian regulations on human exposure to electromagnetic fields, which set limits up to 100 times lower than those defined by ICNIRP [...] and applied in the rest of Europe". WindTre (2019, p. 76) further emphasized that they would respect these strict limitations, elaborating on "the extremely precautionary approach taken by our country for all radio technologies". As can be seen, the actual 5G-related concerns were neither directly nor extensively addressed.

In sum, we see that telecom companies approached CSR by referring to those with a favorable view of 5G and essentially ignoring those who considered it a threat. By building on shared discourses about CSR and relying on dominant institutions' positions within the conversation, they have promoted a highly relevant aspect of their core business—digitalization—as a CSR topic. Constituting digitalization as a matter of responsibility has allowed them to capitalize on the new meanings in three different ways. They (a) talk their

core business activities into CSR activities, (b) position themselves as helpers of the country, and (c) dismiss alternative views about the 5G without fully engaging with raised concerns.

Thus, our data illustrate a novel approach to CSR common to all the telecom companies under investigation. When confronted with a highly polarized landscape, wherein separate and mutually delegitimizing stakeholders' conversations about social and ethical expectations towards them exist, companies may engage in what we call "partisan CSR". This approach to social responsibility is characterized by companies not trying to establish a dialogue with all stakeholders, but engaging with one side of the polarized stakeholders' expectations while ignoring the other side's expectations. Within this conversation, companies build on the highly homogeneous meanings to promote certain views aimed at expanding further CSR meanings. They are, thus, able to capitalize on these newly shaped meanings.

4.6 Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis shows that, in circumstances of polarization about corporate responsibility meanings, companies may approach CSR by referring to only one of the polarized conversations. The studied telecom companies did not try to please everyone, but focused their CSR-related efforts on one set of stakeholders, engaging in dialogue only with them. Specifically, they almost exclusively referred to those stakeholders already viewing 5G as progress, whilst ignoring other stakeholders who saw it as a threat. By building on existing views, they can shape CSR-related meanings (i.e., constituting digitalization as a legitimate CSR topic) and capitalize on them by positioning themselves as a CSR-based industry while dismissing alternative views on 5G. We believe that these insights make two contributions to prior literature.

No Longer an All-public Moral Communication: CSR Communication Contributing to Polarization

Our study contributes to the literature on CSR by illustrating how companies may approach CSR in a highly polarized environment. It thus offers an empirical account of

the theoretical issues that arise in the literature. In doing so, our study also illustrates the changing reach and scope of CSR communication under polarized circumstances and its ensuing implications for the further polarization of stakeholders' social and ethical expectations.

Scholars have advocated for dialogue as the ideal approach to address the increasing CSR-related pressure on organizations (Colleoni, 2013; Du & Vieira, 2012). This approach suggests that companies should actively participate in the CSR conversation to understand, co-construct, and ultimately meet the demands of stakeholders (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, idealized forms of dialogical approaches are often impractical because the CSR conversation is frequently characterized by conflicting perspectives, preventing the emergence and crystallization of a consistent set of meanings (Castelló et al., 2013; Schultz et al., 2013). Therefore, rather than democratic deliberations, prior literature describes these dialogues as companies' discursive efforts to actively influence understanding and eventually establish favorable society-wide legitimacy standards through moral reasoning (Dawson & Brunner, 2020; Scherer et al., 2013).

Alternatively, the literature proposes a different approach for companies when the CSR conversation becomes complex and polyvocal, which consists of engaging in strategic silence (Carlos & Lewis, 2018). In such environments, companies may indeed choose not to engage in dialogue with stakeholders to avoid potential confrontations, such as being accused of greenwashing. Therefore, the literature illustrates two dominant approaches to CSR: either entering the conversation to win the discursive struggle and orient understandings, or adopting a silent approach to avoid confrontation.

In polarized circumstances, the existence of multiple and mutually delegitimizing conversations about CSR paves the way for a novel approach that we label "partisan CSR". This approach involves actively engaging in only one ongoing conversation while dismissing the other, essentially interacting within a specific conversation to endorse and promote certain views while remaining silent in the opposing conversation. Importantly, partisan CSR not only describes a different approach to CSR that companies may pursue,

but also reveals a changing reach and scope of CSR communication in a polarized environment, which, notably, may even result in even greater polarization.

First, partisan CSR indicates that CSR communication is no longer an all-public communication in a polarized world, suggesting its potential targeted nature. Instead of aiming to establish a dialogue with all stakeholders as in dialogical approaches (Colleoni, 2013), companies focus on a subset of stakeholders while disregarding others. This understanding extends the work of Morsing et al. (2008), who proposed a two-step process for CSR communication of addressing expert stakeholders who will convey the message to other stakeholders. Our research suggests that CSR communication may prioritize certain stakeholders while ignoring others, emphasizing the targeted nature of CSR communication in polarized environments.

Second, partisan CSR not only adds to the changing reach of CSR communication in a polarized landscape, but also implies a shift in its content. When communicating in a conversation filled with disparate views, companies have to engage in moral reasoning and the legitimation of fundamental beliefs (Dawson & Brunner, 2020; Scherer et al., 2013). In partisan CSR, companies communicate with stakeholders who already share similar views. This allows them to concentrate on further channeling specific stakeholders' expectations rather than struggling to shape society-wide legitimacy standards, as illustrated by Scherer et al. (2013). Thus, CSR communication in polarized circumstances revolves around reinforcing existing meanings to leverage them rather than engaging in society-wide moral discussions about what constitutes desirable corporate behaviors.

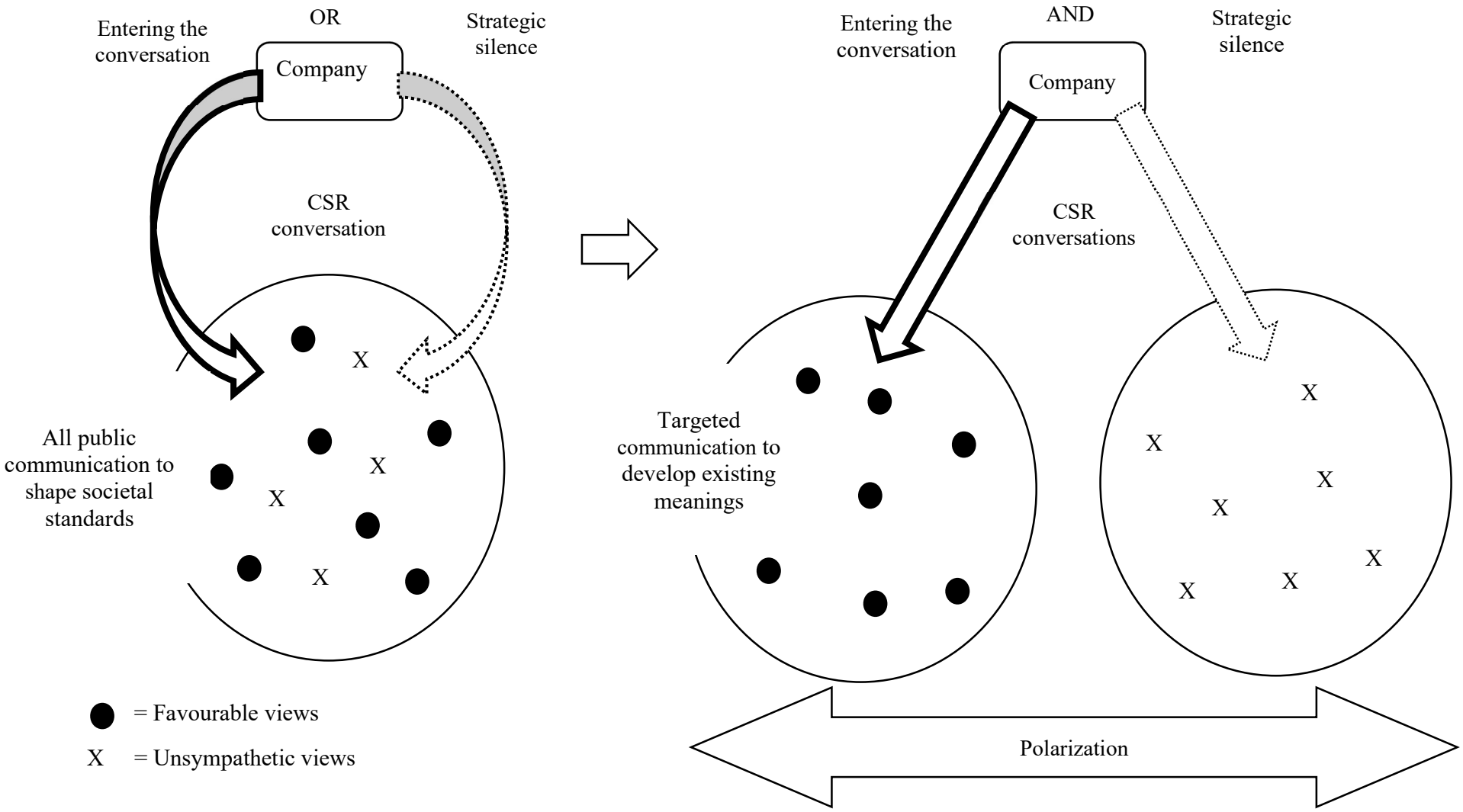

Figure 3 - Changing approach to CSR and CSR communication in polarized environments.

In this sense, partisan CSR is also interesting from a strategic point of view, as it integrates the advantages derived from the two previously discussed CSR approaches. As Figure 3 illustrates, when navigating a complex and polyvocal CSR conversation, companies face the choice of either actively engaging and endeavoring to prevail in discursive struggles or abstaining from participation to minimize confrontation. Through partisan CSR, companies can strategically select conversations in which favorable meanings predominate while avoiding engagement in those dominated by unsympathetic views. This selective approach enables them to nurture conversations in their favor and circumvent confrontations with actors holding contrasting perspectives, thereby combining the benefits of both approaches. Moreover, partisan CSR also demonstrates the importance of dismissing conversations harboring unsympathetic meanings without direct engagement. By avoiding interactions with contrasting views, companies prevent potential backfires (Fackler, 2021) that could reinforce contrasting viewpoints. Therefore, this approach not only safeguards companies against confrontation (Carlos & Lewis, 2018), but also discourages unproductive interactions, effectively inhibiting the reinforcement of opposing perspectives (Fackler, 2021).

Figure 3 provides a visual account of the partisan approach to CSR. This approach implies a CSR communication that, in polarized times, (a) is no longer an all-public communication aimed at pleasing and/or convincing everyone, but rather a targeted communication that endorses one side while ignoring the other; and (b) is no longer about moral reasoning to legitimize basic assumptions, but rather a communication strategy that reinforces and further develops existing favorable meanings while dismissing unsympathetic ones. Importantly, Figure 3 also illustrates that companies not only operate within a polarized society but also contribute to its polarization when adopting a partisan approach to CSR.

In unitary CSR conversations, even in the messiest and most polyphonic debates addressed with non-idealistic communication practices (see left side of Figure 3), the communicative efforts of companies consist of interacting with different actors to negotiate moral and ethical standards. Such conversations entail the pursuit of common ground across society in an effort to align everyone towards the midpoint of contrasting opinions in order to seek

a compromise. Conversely, in a polarized landscape where alternative conversations develop separately (see right side of Figure 3), companies embracing partisan CSR direct their communication efforts towards further developing certain meanings—not towards a midpoint, the metaphorical mean of the contrasting opinion, but towards the other extreme. Indeed, through partisan CSR, companies not even an attempt to interact with those stakeholders having alternative views to alter them; the focus lies solely on the development of favorable meanings, and alternative views are taken into consideration at best to delegitimize them. Partisan CSR, thus, exacerbates the divergence of alternative conversations, thereby intensifying the polarization within an already polarized debate.

From Shaping Business for Responsibility to Shaping Responsibility for Business

We also contribute to the CSR literature by extending the discourse on the traditional financial–social interests' conflict of CSR. Scholars have stressed the inherently paradoxical nature of CSR, as corporate social activities contrast with the economic interests of corporations (Dawson & Brunner, 2020). Indeed, by engaging in CSR activities, companies may improve their social performance as they pursue social interests, but this may decrease their financial performance as they come with a financial cost (Haffar & Searcy, 2017).

This financial–social conflict for organizations engaging in CSR has been solved by acknowledging that CSR activities, although costly, are financially beneficial in the long term, providing legitimacy and reputation-related returns (Barnett, 2019; for contrasting views, see Haffar & Searcy, 2017). Indeed, the "business case for CSR" implies that companies add CSR activities pursuing societal interests to their business models to gain favorable goodwill and, thus, financial return in the long run. This understanding corresponds to what Cornelissen (2020) defined as promotional and strategic CSR. However, the idea of doing well by doing good (Drucker, 1984) has gone even further. Some more advanced approaches to CSR have resulted in companies embedding responsibility issues at the core of their business models (Van Marrewijk & Were, 2003). Concepts like created shared value (CSV; Porter & Kramer, 2011) and the transformational approach to CSR (Cornelissen, 2020) refer to business models designed

to generate revenues from ethically and socially driven economic activities that, consequently, advocate for societal interests.

In sum, companies try to gain both financial and social returns by shaping their core business according to the framework of meanings constituting CSR expectations, whether they add CSR-related activities to their business model or embed CSR meanings in the core of their business model. Our analysis shows that companies may try to gain both financial and social returns differently. Indeed, they may not add or modify the core business model according to CSR-related meanings, but rather engage in shaping the CSR meanings according to their business model. By embracing polarization, companies may try to manipulate what corporate responsibilities are to match their business model. By constituting digitalization as a CSR topic, telecom companies are able to make responsibility fit with their core business activities. Thus, they solve the social–financial conflict not by shaping the business according to CSR meanings, but rather by shaping CSR meanings according to their business.

This alternative approach to resolving the social–financial interest conflict of CSR carries significant implications for understanding the drivers that shape CSR expectations. The conventional approach to tackling this conflict, the "business case", relies primarily on societal interests as the foundation for defining responsibility expectations. Indeed, during CSR debates, social actors contribute to the construction of CSR-related meanings by deliberating over which behaviors companies ought to adopt to serve societal interests. These constructed CSR expectations subsequently shape business practices, either as supplementary components or as integral parts of business models. In this vein, companies align their operations with CSR meanings influenced by societal interests. Through partisan CSR, companies instead mold CSR meanings in accordance with their business objectives. As a result, the financial interests that underpin businesses indirectly affect the constitution of the CSR framework. Therefore, although societal interests still play a significant role in shaping CSR expectations and the corresponding framework of meanings, it is worth acknowledging that financial interests can also exert an influence on this process in a polarized world.

Limitations and Concluding Remarks

This paper is based on a single study with specific characteristics. Partisan CSR has emerged in a situation of polarized opinions sparked by the introduction of a technology that is core to the business activities of the industry under investigation. In this sense, the telecom industry has distinctive characteristics that position it at the forefront of polarizing circumstances. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is not exclusive to the telecom sector. Industries dealing with technological and scientific innovations, such as the pharmaceutical industry, are also significantly affected by polarization in relation to their core business activities. Thus, although the current impact of polarization on telecom companies may appear more pronounced than in other sectors, similar situations exist across multiple industries, supporting the analytical generalizability of the conclusions drawn from our research. Furthermore, it is worth noting that other industries may experience polarization indirectly. For instance, businesses involved in the production chain of technology/science-based companies might also be affected by the polarizing dynamics. Future research could investigate how companies approach CSR under circumstances of polarization when the object polarizing the opinions is only tangentially associated with their business operations, if at all.

Moreover, the scope of our research focuses on how telecom companies approach CSR, but does not allow us to elaborate on the reception of corporate voices by other social actors. Therefore, we do not know how companies' voices influence the overall meaning construction. Longitudinal studies may shed light on that while also generating insights into how the communicative constitution of an institution like CSR (Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010) influences the communicative constitution of organizations, thereby linking a CCO-based understanding of CSR (Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013) with the literature on communicative institutionalism (Cornelissen et al., 2015).

Despite these limitations and ways to address them, we believe the importance of our paper lies in acknowledging that CSR expectations are constituted into fragmented, separate conversations in polarized debates, and that companies embracing this polarization further shape corporate responsibility expectations. By approaching CSR through the identified

partisan approach, CSR communication becomes targeted, shifts content-wise, and contributes to the further polarization of CSR conversations. Moreover, this approach may lead companies to shape CSR meanings according to their business objectives, rather than accommodating their business to this framework of meanings.

The partisan CSR approach, we believe, highlights an important overarching dynamic that affects CSR and, broadly speaking, business–society relationships. Specifically, we argue that further polarization of CSR conversations that companies' behaviors (also) produce in pursuing CSR and the act of shaping CSR meanings according to companies' business (instead of doing the contrary) might jeopardize the very essence of CSR, meant to contribute to societal well-being, by turning it into a purely strategic corporate communication activity. On the one hand, with increasing polarization, corporations will only favor certain stakeholders and not society as a whole. As companies establish a dialogue not with all social actors populating the environment but only with certain stakeholders, they may label activities as "CSR" when they actually embody only the expectations of some strategically relevant stakeholders and, thus, only meet their expectations rather than societal expectations. In keeping with Barnett's (2019, p. 170) ideas, this would turn CSR from corporate social responsibility into "critical stakeholder responsiveness", thereby failing to address societal interests and serving only key stakeholders' interests. On the other hand, this continuous stretching of responsibility meanings may blur the notion of CSR into countless applications that may increasingly serve business objectives rather than societal interests. As shown, in polarizing circumstances, companies can more easily mold CSR expectations and, therefore, may be increasingly tempted to approach CSR from a utilitarian point of view, labeling any corporate activity as a responsible act. Consequently, the focus shifts further away from benefiting society towards serving business interests. In essence, companies embracing polarization in their pursuit of addressing CSR expectations can deplete the significance of CSR, making it a purely strategic tool.

Considering these implications, there is an urgent need to investigate how the interests of society as a whole factor into the formation of CSR meanings and subsequent expectations. Given the ethical and social nature of CSR, the prevailing assumption in the literature is

that the framework of CSR meanings is constituted by societal interests. However, our study suggests that this assumption may not necessarily hold in an increasingly polarized world in which key stakeholders and corporate interests prevail. Therefore, we encourage future research to elucidate how the interests of any part of the population, transcending groups' interests and organizations' goals, are incorporated into the CSR conversation(s), how they affect the formation of meanings, and which actors are instrumental in elevating these interests to the forefront.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Guiding Assumptions and Puzzle of the Dissertation

This Ph.D. research starts by acknowledging the performative nature of communication. In this view, communication is not a mere conveyor of pre-existing meanings, facilitating the transmission of messages from point A to point B, as traditionally conceptualized. Instead, communication is conceptualized as a nuanced system of interconnected interactions which (re)shape common and shared meanings, eventually forming intersubjective social facts that influence human interpretations and behaviors (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Luckmann, 2013; Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Cooren and Seidl, 2022).

This understanding of communication as constitutive is widely acknowledged in the organizational field. Various streams of scholarly thought have explored and analyzed the implications of this conceptualization within the realm of organizations and organizational life. Scholars from diverse theoretical backgrounds, including Communication Constitutes Organizations (Taylor and Van Every, 2000; Cooren, 2000), Institutionalism (Phillips et al., 2004; Cornelissen et al., 2015), and Stakeholder Theory (Koschmann, 2016), have extensively elaborated on the constitutive role of communication in organizing, organizations, and organizational life. Firstly, communication is constitutive of organizing as it constitutes the alignment, coordination, and structuring activities necessary for collective task pursuit (Cooren et al, 2011; Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Secondly, communication shapes organizations by granting them actorhoods and defining their characteristics through interactions with external actors, given the inherently relational nature of these constructs (Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). Thirdly, communication molds organizational life by constituting, reproducing, and shaping the rules, norms, and conventions - i.e., the institutions - governing organizational behaviors (Cornelissen et al., 2015).

In essence, communication is pivotal in converging disparate views and experiences into established, shared meanings and understandings. These shared understandings serve as

the foundation for alignment and coordination, recognition of organizational actorhood and characteristics, and guidance of organizational behaviors within specific institutional contexts.

However, in our polarized post-truth era, establishing common meanings and understandings has become increasingly challenging. In the post-truth we indeed observe a new contrast of opinions, wherein polarized groups have contrasting assumptions and beliefs based on alternative facts (Foroughi et al., 2019; Harsin, 2018). This often results in communication breakdowns where individuals and collectives having diverging views fail to find common ground for constructive dialogue (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019; Waisbord, 2018; Meyer and Vaara, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this dissertation has explored how inherently communicative entities and products such as organizing, organizations, and organizational behavior are influenced by and relate to the inability to establish common meanings in communication within our polarized post-truth era. By doing so, I tried to untangle the relationships between organizations, polarization, and communication.

To address this overarching issue, the dissertation has delved into three specific aspects. Firstly, it examined how the inability to establish common meanings emerges in communicative organizing practices. Secondly, it tackled inter-group incommunicability at the organizational level, proposing an analytical framework to bridge communicative gaps between collectives with differing views. Lastly, it explored how the inability to establish meaningful interactions affects and shapes organizational behavior.

In the following pages, I will elaborate on my findings, discuss how their integration advances our understanding of organization, communication, and polarization, and outline their broader implications for research and society.

5.2 Organizations in a World Without Truth

Theorizing the Relationship Between Organization, Communication, and Polarization

In order to address the guiding research question concerning the interplay between communication entities such as organizing and organizations and the pervasive polarization of the post-truth era, marked by the inability to foster meaningful dialogue across different opinions, I conducted two empirical studies (Chapters 2 and 4) and developed a conceptual paper (Chapter 3). While the conceptual paper proposes an analytical framework to address the communication breakdowns deriving from the incommunicability, the empirical studies delve into the phenomenon of post-truth polarization and to explore its influence on and its relationships with organization(s) and the related communicative processes.

In the second chapter, I conducted an in-depth examination of a highly polarized organization, specifically the anti-5G activist group, to understand how such groups become unable to engage in meaningful dialogue with those holding divergent views, or in other words, how they polarize in communication. The investigation revealed that the group's communicative organizing practices taking place in the segregated social media space exacerbated into polarizing behaviors. In other words, by isolating themselves within echo chambers devoid of dissenting voices, the group's organizing dynamics shifted from alignment and coordination towards self-referentiality, resulting in an inability to engage with alternative perspectives. This thus underscores how organizing practices within segregated spaces can intensify until fueling polarization, preventing communication across the contrast of opinions.

The fourth chapter focused instead on examining the (communicative) behavior of organizations when confronted with polarization. Specifically, I analyzed how telecom companies involved in the marketization of 5G-based products navigated the challenges posed by polarized stakeholder groups with conflicting expectations regarding their ethical and social responsibilities. Confronted with mutually delegitimizing stakeholder sides, these companies tended to align their organizational communication behavior with one group, while ignoring or dismissing the concerns of the opposing faction. In fact, rather than seeking common ground or compromise between the polarized sides, the companies' communication reinforces the perspectives of one stakeholders' subset, thereby deepening the divide between the opposing factions, and, thus, inadvertently sharpening further the

existing polarization. Essentially, data show that when confronted with polarized sides, companies may have the propensity to embrace polarization and engage in one-sided, isolated conversations. By doing so, they exacerbate polarization further through their organizational communication behavior.

Therefore, in examining both cases, we can see a common thread: organization(s) - encompassing both organizing practices and organizational behavior aimed at fostering relationships - works as catalysts for the cultivation of polarization and polarizing dynamics.

The organizational communication observed in both cases (re)produce certain meanings and understandings through continuous one-sided interactions, ultimately reifying these interpretations as social facts within the collective consciousness. This communicative process, wherein meanings become shared and taken-for-granted, underpins virtually every facet of organizational life, as they are necessary to allow alignment, coordination, and structuring. For the anti-5G activist group, this communicative process was pivotal for internal organization, as it is instrumental in mobilizing collective action, and establishing actorhood and collective identity. In a similar vein, for telecom companies, this communicative process was pivotal in framing 5G technologies positively, positioning it as beneficial for society, and thus facilitating the coordination and structuring of multi-stakeholder efforts to promote their widespread adoption.

However, our observations also unveil a concerning phenomenon initiated by organizational dynamics. Indeed, the alignment and coordination facilitated by organizational communication in both cases radicalized until the point of hindering the possibility of constructive dialogue with dissenting perspectives. Within the activist group, members faithfully adhere to their version of truth regarding '5G-as-a-threat', dismissing opposing viewpoints as deceitful or misinformed. Similarly, telecom companies, building on stakeholders' favorable view of 5G, further stretched those meanings, framing 5G as a corporate social responsibility akin to environmentalism or gender equality, thereby exacerbating the divide with those being concerned about 5G.

In essence, I observed in both cases that the organizational communication processes have transcended into polarizing dynamics, manifesting as an inability to engage with dissenting views or exacerbating existing divergence. In this sense, while these processes of institutionalization of meanings and understandings facilitate and reinforce organization by providing a common ground among those to take part to this communicative process, they simultaneously make more difficult the creation of the common ground with those who are excluded, thereby hampering the construction of a meaningful dialogue across contrasting collectives.

Therefore, evidence suggests that polarization and polarizing dynamics may arise from exacerbated organizational dynamics, moving beyond alignment and coordination to radicalize collective positions.

Empirical findings, however, suggest that a pivotal condition for organizational dynamics to transcend from alignment and coordination to polarization is fragmentation.

While frequently used together, fragmentation and polarization denote distinct phenomena within the public sphere (Webster and Ksiazek, 2012). Fragmentation signifies the splintering of media platforms and channels into myriad separate arenas of discourse, whereas polarization denotes the opposition between communities of belief, characterized by a strong 'us vs them' sentiment and an inability to engage in constructive dialogue across ideological divides (Waisbord 2018; Sunstein, 2007, 2009). According to our findings, when organizational communication occurs in a fragmented social context, marked by the segregation of collectives into isolated conversational and informational spaces, polarization often ensues. For instance, the activist group's organizing practices unfolded within a segregated conversational arena, where the organizing narrative developed unchallenged, acquiring a quasi-factual status for members. Consequently, meaningful dialogue with dissenting viewpoints became virtually impossible, as non-members did not embrace the unquestionable truths around which member are aligned. Similarly, Telecom companies established a dialogue on corporate social responsibility without interacting with those having a negative opinion of 5G, further increasing the separation from one another. This fragmentation of conversations allowed these

companies to build on favorable meanings without engaging with negative ones. Positive meanings were indeed reinforced and expanded without the need to find a compromise with those advancing negative views of 5G. Therefore, instead of softening polarization through an all-inclusive dialogue, their organizational communicative behavior intensified polarization.

This empirical evidence thus suggests that in social contexts characterized by fragmentation, organizational dynamics are prone to constituting or exacerbating polarization. Specifically, my dissertation posits that when organizational communication occurs within one-sided conversational arenas, alignment and coordination can transcend into radicalization and self-referentiality. Consequently, intra-group cohesion intensifies while inter-group dialogue becomes increasingly challenging, thereby fostering post-truth polarization. In essence, polarization emerges as a byproduct of organizational dynamics taking place within fragmented social contexts.

This insight underscores an overlooked aspect of organizational communication. Previous scholarly discourse within organization studies has predominantly focused on the convergence properties of communication within organizational contexts. Scholars have indeed based on Berger and Luckmann (1966), Dewey (1916), Austin (1962), and Searle's (1969) insights to highlight how repeated discursive interactions foster the convergence of meanings into shared understandings, thereby constituting social realities. Organizational scholarships have elaborated extensively on this property of communication, emphasizing its role in facilitating the convergence of meaning, such as in organizing collective action (Cooren, 2000) and establishing mutual recognition and characterization (Kuhn, 2008; Koschmann, 2016), as well as establishing widely accepted norms and behaviors (Cornelissen, 2015).

This dissertation, by investigating the complex interplay between polarization and organization, illustrates that organizational communication, by fostering convergence among participants, can paradoxically engender divergence, thus shedding light on the dual nature of organizational communication. Put differently, my research shows how communication, while facilitating convergence of meanings and understandings through

shared interactions, can also serve as a catalyst for divergence by institutionalizing particular interpretations and perspectives. As participants engage in communicative exchanges, they gradually develop a common framework of assumptions and facts. While this convergence is vital for achieving alignment within and between organizations, it concurrently fosters divergence with individuals excluded from this communicative process. These excluded individuals, lacking access to the established set of assumptions, indeed face challenges in communication due to the disparity in shared vocabulary. Furthermore, this phenomenon is exacerbated in contemporary society, characterized by fragmentation, where individuals engaged in distinct communicative spheres often adopt divergent sets of assumptions. Consequently, communication across differences becomes increasingly complex as alternative vocabularies of assumptions develop.

Therefore, the convergent nature of communication, essential for organizational cohesion, inadvertently contributes to polarization by triggering simultaneous divergence dynamics. In essence, while organization arises from the convergence of shared meanings facilitated by communication, polarization emerges the side-effect, stemming from the divergent properties of communication.

In drawing a conclusion regarding the relationship between communication, organization, and polarization, this thesis thus argues that communication constitutes both organization and polarization. Organization emerges as the result of the convergence properties of communication, while polarization arises from the divergence properties of communication. Importantly, however, organization and polarization are not two separate implications of the different properties of communication; rather, they are intertwined phenomena. As the divergence produced by communication exists because of its convergent properties, polarization emerges out of an exacerbation of organization. In this sense, I argue that organization is the product of communication, while polarization is the byproduct of organizational communication developing under certain conditions.

Polarization as the Foundational Grand Challenge – and Our Responsibility (and Opportunities) as Organizational Scholars

The escalating polarization within our post-truth society, with its hindering of meaningful interaction between individuals holding divergent perspectives (Knight and Tsoukas, 2019), poses a significant challenge. At its essence, societal cohesion relies on widely shared meanings, understandings, and social facts established in interaction and that underpin intersubjective social norms and conventions. These elements govern collective life, delineating proper and desirable actions and behaviors (Berger, 1967). Polarization disrupts this fabric, eroding our capacity to establish common ground on a societal scale (Harsin, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). In polarization, foundational assumptions and factual frameworks that inform individual opinions diverge and this divergence undermines the formation of shared institutions and institutional facts across society. Without a shared basis in norms, conventions, and facts, the viability of collective living is compromised. Indeed, individuals in a polarized society not only argue because of differing interests and priorities, as contrasts have been characterized so far, but face insurmountable disparities in their fundamental understandings of proper societal behavior (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). Consequently, a society characterized by irreconcilable interpretations of proper conduct, rooted in contrasting assumptions, presents structural issues.

Arguably, one of the most problematic (and tangible) consequences of polarization is its hindrance to effectively addressing the overarching 'grand challenges' confronting society.

Contemporary discourse, echoed by both commentators and scholars, underscores the prevalence of what are termed 'grand challenges' in our era. These challenges are defined as "specific critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem" (Grand Challenges Canada, 2011, p. iv, cited in Gümüsay et al., 2020:2, and George et al., 2016:1881), and encompass fundamental social, economic, and political issues such as climate change and poverty. Given their complexity, tackling these challenges necessitates collective societal coordination and action (Ferraro et al., 2016). In other words, the collaborative effort of multiple actors is imperative to address them. However, polarization directly undermines our capacity to coordinate collective efforts toward addressing these complex societal issues due to breakdowns in communication. The inability to align on the definition of problems and objectives, and thus to structure

subsequent actions, arguably makes tackling these grand challenges virtually impossible. Hence, polarization emerges as a foundational grand challenge itself, as it impedes societal organization and, consequently, the collective efforts needed to address grand challenges.

Recognizing the huge threat posed by polarization to our societal fabric, I believe scholarly efforts should be channeled into comprehensively understanding this phenomenon to propose effective solutions to mitigate its impact. Our conceptualization of polarization as an exacerbation of organizational dynamics occurring in isolation wants to be a step in this direction.

In this dissertation, indeed, the third chapter exploits this conceptualization. By understanding polarization as a byproduct of separated communicative processes of alignment and identity-making, it was possible to develop a tool to address the inter-group communication breakdowns characterizing our post-truth society.

Through the narrative framework proposed, indeed, it is possible to investigate stakeholders' understandings of issues, thereby revealing the underlying assumptions and beliefs that underpin opposing positions, and thus facilitating a deeper understanding of divergent perspectives. In other words, the proposed framework deconstructs and makes explicit the assumptions and facts that underlie opinions, thus serving as tool to develop an antidote to counteract the fragmentation fueling polarizing organizational dynamics. In essence, our approach leverages the understanding of polarization as an exacerbation of organizational communication dynamics to provide a tool aimed at alleviating incommunicability by addressing the underlying conditions that lead to polarization - i.e., the fragmentation of communicative processes. In this sense, by employing this framework to understand others' perspectives, we can tackle the divergent nature of communication and dismantle the barriers that characterize today's polarized interactions.

Beyond the specific contributions made in this dissertation and the solutions offered, the value of this work lies in its demonstration that an organizational perspective on polarization can offer fertile ground for future research that deepen our comprehension of this social phenomenon. For instance, future research could explore whether other factors beyond isolation contribute to organizational dynamics transcending into polarizing

dynamics. Indeed, studies could delve into the impact of different leadership styles on organizational polarization, potentially identifying characteristics akin to a 'polarization entrepreneur'. Additionally, another potentially interesting avenue for future research could involve examining whether certain organizational fields or industries are more prone to polarization dynamics than others. For instance, there appears to be a heightened likelihood of polarization around topics related to technology and pharmaceuticals. Research could explore whether this observation holds true or not, and if so, elucidate the organizational or industry-specific traits that predispose them to polarization. In sum, developing research in this direction could indeed help us better understand the phenomenon of polarization and propose innovative solutions to address it.

On the other hand, examining polarization through an organizational lens not only enhances our understanding of polarization but also helps shed further light on traditional organizational and management topics.

In this dissertation, for instance, exploring polarization helped question our understanding of the impact of digital media on organizational boundaries, often perceived as blurring them (Dawson, 2018; Bimber et al., 2012). Through empirical analysis of a polarized organization, I illustrated how digital media can, in fact, reinforce the consolidation of organizational boundaries (Chapter 2). Similarly, studying polarization in organizational settings enabled me to propose novel approaches to stakeholder analysis aimed at understanding stakeholders' viewpoints, potentially enhancing stakeholder management (Chapter 3), as well as to illustrate novel approaches to corporate responsibility that allowed me to elaborate conceptual insights into their potential implications for contemporary CSR-related behaviors (Chapter 4).

In this vein, investigating polarization from an organizational perspective holds the potential to be insightful regarding other organizational phenomena. For instance, it could be interesting to study the formation of organizationally relevant social evaluations (see Bitektine, 2011) in a polarized world and the following implications for management. Future research could indeed investigate the implications for companies operating in a polarized environment where irreconcilable legitimacy or social approval standards

coexist. This exploration could examine, for example, how the presence of these contrasting standards influences organizations' efforts to maintain a robust corporate reputation. Additionally, it could be explored how organizations behave to prevent stigmatization and respond to crises or scandals in a polarized context where social evaluations diverge.

In conclusion, examining polarization through an organizational lens may not only deepen our understanding of this social phenomenon and aid in proposing solutions, but it may also enhance our comprehension of organizational and management dynamics. By pursuing this dual objective, we, as organizational scholars, will be able to expand the explanatory capacity of our scholarship, transcending the traditional boundaries of organizational studies and making it pivotal for comprehending broader societal phenomena.

Scholars have argued that we inhabit an 'Organizational Society' (Presthus, 1962; Perrow, 1991), where organizations and dynamics of organizing underscore virtually every aspect shaping our social fabric. If this holds true, our efforts in understanding social phenomena through an organizational lens to address (grand)challenges are not only valuable, but needed.

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Appendix 1. Updated Version of Chapter 3

Seeing Through a Polarized World: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Stakeholders

Purpose – The literature presents several frameworks for stakeholder analysis, mainly focusing on identification and characterization. However, there is a notable lack of frameworks aimed at comprehensively understanding stakeholders' perspectives. Neglecting stakeholders' viewpoints risks biasing overarching analyses, given the relational and perspective–based nature of stakeholders' relevance and characteristics. Moreover, this gap is particularly salient in today's polarized landscape, where understandings of issues can markedly diverge. To address this gap, this paper introduces a stakeholder analysis framework designed to facilitate a deeper understanding of stakeholders' perspectives.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper introduces a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis through conceptual arguments and illustrates it through a case study – the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy.

Findings – The paper illustrates how a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis enhances an understanding of stakeholders' perspectives by revealing issue-specific sentiments and assumptions, objectives and expectations regarding other stakeholders' behaviors, and relationships in place.

Originality – Introducing a narrative approach to understanding stakeholders' perspectives fills a gap in the literature on stakeholder analysis. This proves valuable for managers and is conceptually relevant, fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking in a polarized world.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement, Stakeholder Analysis, Polarization, Narrative

Seeing Through a Polarized World: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Stakeholders

In academic literature, the importance of stakeholder engagement for organizational success is widely recognized (Ihlen, 2008; Holzer, 2008). Achieving effective stakeholder engagement, however, necessitates a thorough stakeholder analysis process (Koschmann, 2016). This process involves identifying relevant social actors having a stake in organizational-relevant issues, understanding their perspectives on it, and characterizing them in light of the issue to prioritize their salience (Mitchell and Lee, 2019). However, while scholars have proposed numerous methods for identifying and characterizing stakeholders to prioritize them, a significant gap persists regarding analytical frameworks that facilitate organizations' understanding of stakeholders' sentiments, objectives and expectations, and relationships regarding the issue (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

Recent contributions in stakeholder theory, emphasizing the relational and perspectival nature of the relevance and characteristics of social actors (Koschmann, 2016; Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021), underscore the importance of addressing this gap. Indeed, a lack of understanding of other stakeholders' perspectives — namely their assumptions and sentiments, objectives and expectations, and relationships regarding the issue — can undermine the effectiveness of stakeholder analysis in informing engagement strategies. These strategies may otherwise be developed solely through the lens of the focal organization's perspective. Moreover, this gap becomes even more critical in the context of the increasing polarization of contemporary corporate landscapes (Ihlen *et al*., 2019), which often leads to irreconcilable understandings, making it increasingly problematic to assume uniform assumptions, expectations, goals, and relationships.

Acknowledging this gap in the literature and its relevance for contemporary stakeholder engagement, this conceptual paper proposes an approach to stakeholder analysis which aims at understanding stakeholders' perspectives through the exploration of the discursive processes unfolding around the issue. Specifically, we introduce a three-step analytical framework that delves into stakeholders' understandings by exploiting the ongoing narratives surrounding it.

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, we underscore the lack of approaches to stakeholder analysis that comprehensively assess stakeholders' perspectives. Subsequently, we argue that understanding stakeholders' perspectives necessitates a focus on the discursive processes surrounding the issue. Indeed, from these processes, efficient sensemaking tools such as narratives emerge. We will then argue how examining these narratives may offer insights into stakeholders' assumptions and sentiments, objectives and expectations, and relationships in place regarding the issue.

Building upon these conceptual arguments, we will introduce our three-step framework to understanding stakeholders. Following this, we apply our framework to a case study — the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy.

In conclusion, we discuss the managerial and theoretical implications of adopting a narrative approach to stakeholder analysis. We underscore the advantages of providing managers with a framework that enriches stakeholder analysis by integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives and improves the identification and characterization of stakeholders. Furthermore, we elaborate on how our framework contributes to the field by providing an analytical tool for engaging with stakeholder management through a systemic lens, transcending conventional dyadic company-stakeholder relationships and centering the issue

over the focal organization – an aspect particularly critical in contemporary polarized and fragmented contexts.

Extant Approaches to Stakeholder Analysis: The Need for a Framework to Understanding Stakeholders

Establishing positive relationships with stakeholders and engaging with them is crucial for the success of companies (Ihlen, 2008). This indeed offers several benefits for businesses, including the enhancement of corporate social performance, reputation, and legitimacy, as well as informational advantages and the fostering of innovation (King, 2008; Holzer, 2008; Hutt, 2010). Therefore, effective engagement with stakeholders is a key function for companies.

However, successful stakeholder engagement necessitates proper stakeholder analysis (Koschmann, 2016; Hutt, 2010). This analysis comprises three components: stakeholder identification, understanding, and prioritization. Stakeholder identification involves scanning the environment to recognize relevant social actors who could potentially impact the company's operations in the context of a given issue. Understanding stakeholders requires the company to comprehend their issue-related perspectives, objectives, and expectations. Prioritization involves characterizing stakeholders to determine which ones should be addressed first (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

Over the years, extensive research on stakeholder analysis has made a significant contribution to the stakeholder literature. For example, Phillips (2003) proposes a stakeholder analysis framework based on the company's obligations to different groups, categorizing social actors into derivative and normative stakeholders. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest mapping stakeholders based on their recognition of problems and constraints, as well as their level of involvement. Other studies recommend analyzing stakeholders based on their

cooperative or potentially threatening behavior (Savage *et al.*, 1991) or the influence they exert or are subjected to (Mariconda and Lurati, 2015). Neville and Menguc (2006) propose analyzing stakeholders based on the relationships established among them, including competing, complementary, or cooperative relationships. Similarly, Holzer (2008) suggests classifying stakeholders into passive, dominated, and divided coalitions, characterizing stakeholders based on their ability to exert pressure on organizations. Additionally, the literature suggests analyzing stakeholders according to their attributes, such as in Mendelow's (1991) power and interest matrix or in the well-known stakeholder analysis framework by Mitchell and colleagues (1997), where their salience depends on their urgency, legitimacy, and power.

As evident, the emphasis in the key contributions to the stakeholder analysis literature centers on identifying who the stakeholders are (e.g., Phillips, 2003), characterizing them (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), and delineating their behaviors (see Savage *et al.*, 1999). These contributions thus provide crucial information for stakeholder identification and characterization for prioritization. However, the literature still lacks approaches that focus on understanding stakeholders' perspectives on the issue, including their expectations and goals related to it (Mitchell and Lee, 2019).

This critical gap in the literature poses significant challenges. Without exploring and obtaining a comprehensive understanding of other stakeholders' perspectives, organizations risk conducting analyses solely from their own viewpoints. This narrow focus can also impair the quality of stakeholder identification and characterization, resulting in biased and inaccurate analyses that ultimately hinder successful stakeholder engagement. In fact, according to institutional and communication-as-performative perspectives on stakeholder literature, stakeholders' relevance, stakes on an issue, and characteristics are not predetermined or objective (Koschmann, 2016). In this perspective, organizations are viewed

as social constructs that depend on the existing relationships in their environment (Beaulieu and Pasquero, 2002; Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021). Consequently, the legitimacy of stakeholders' stakes and their characteristics such as power and influence emerge from the interactions among various social actors (Koschmann, 2016). These elements can thus vary from issue to issue and even among stakeholders around the same issue (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Indeed, when they have differing beliefs, objectives, and relationships, stakeholders may hold divergent views on the relevance or power of other stakeholders (Koschmann, 2016). Failing to consider these diverse perspectives can thus lead to biased analyses where, for example, certain stakeholders are erroneously deemed irrelevant despite their significant influence on others.

Furthermore, the need for a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' perspectives is amplified in today's context marked by sharp polarization (Ihlen *et al*., 2019). In environments where different assumptions and 'alternative facts' coexist, extremely divergent understandings may develop around the same issues, transcending the traditional differences in priorities and interests (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). Consequently, it can no longer be assumed, for example, that information considered true, or sources deemed trustworthy are universally perceived as such. Thus, while understanding perspectives has always been crucial, the complexity of today's stakeholder landscape makes it indispensable.

Given these considerations, there is an urgent need for analytical tools to assess stakeholders' understanding of issues. In this paper, we propose a framework that, through the investigation of discursive processes surrounding issues and a narrative lens, enables the development of a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' views. In the following sections, we will present the theoretical assumptions and arguments underpinning our framework, discussing why a discursive approach, particularly employing narratives, may be

beneficial. Subsequently, we will introduce our framework and illustrate its application through a case study — the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy.

Exploring Discursive Processes to Understanding Stakeholders: The Role of Narratives

In recent years, many management scholars, particularly those in institutional theory scholarship, have adopted a constitutive understanding of communication (Cornelissen *et al*., 2015). Rooted in social constructivist perspectives (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), this viewpoint sees communication not merely as a passive conveyor of pre-existing realities, but as an active force that shapes social facts, including organizations and institutions. According to this view, individuals and collectives, through communication, co-construct shared meanings and understandings, which solidify as social facts through repeated interactions, effectively shaping our social reality and influencing interpretations in a circular relationship (Cornelissen *et al*., 2015).

This constructivist approach to communication has been – sometimes implicitly – embraced by various scholars in stakeholder or public relations literature (see Brønn and Brønn, 2003; Beaulieu and Pasquero, 2002; Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010), and some have drawn on it and explicitly on institutional dynamics to elaborate on stakeholder systems (Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021). Within this conceptualization of communication applied to stakeholder thinking, the emerging perspective suggests that complex discursive processes unfold around corporate-sensitive issues, shaping different views and understandings of these (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013). In essence, various social actors engage in dialogue about the issue, expressing their opinions and sharing views, experiences, interests, and expectations. These competing meanings vie for establishing the truth and correct interpretation of the issue, ultimately shaping diverse positions on it (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010; Jensen, 2002). Throughout this process, the diverse positions resulting from ongoing discursive processes

crystallize into narratives about the issue (Ihlen, 2008; Jensen, 2002). Narratives indeed serve as valuable sensemaking tools due to their ability to reduce complexity and provide ready-to-use normative evaluations of matters (King, 2008; Hardy and Maguire, 2010).

According to this theoretical orientation, narratives crystallize the different positions on the issue. Therefore, they emerge as a valuable vantage point for exploring stakeholder understandings.

In the following pages, we will first elaborate on why narratives serve as sensemaking tools, embodying stakeholders' positions. Then, we will discuss how they can be used to gain insights into stakeholders' perspectives on the issue.

Narratives as Sensemaking Tools

Narratives have been conceptualized in various ways in managerial literature (Hyvärinen, 2006). Contrary to the understanding adopted in this paper, the term 'narrative' has often been used in its strategic sense, as a tool applied in storytelling campaigns (see Hearit, 2021). Alternatively, 'narratives' have been employed with a broader sociological take, conceptualized as grand societal discourses and consisting of background mental schemata infused in culture, effectively serving as frameworks for thinking and acting about a subject (see Freeman *et al*., 2020).

In this paper, we maintain a sociological understanding of narrative rather than a strategic one, but we conceptualize narrative as a meso-level concept. Consistent with the institutional and communication-as-constitutive literature (Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Koschmann, 2016), we indeed define narratives as discursive, stereotyped, and normative-driven accounts of events and human actions emerging in human interaction to make sense of and give sense to (aspects of) reality.

In this sense, rather than being strategic communication tools or cultural background schemata, narratives serve as fundamental tools for making sense of and forming judgments about complex phenomena. They achieve this by effectively reducing complexity (Roulet and Bothello, 2022; King, 2008; Hall *et al*., 2021) through a framework for developing normative-driven accounts of the portrayed happening or situation (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). Specifically, this framework encompasses a clear definition of the issue at hand, the introduction of involved characters through archetypal identities, and the assignment of specific goals related to the issue and (intended) actions to achieve them (Hardy and Maguire, 2010).

The emergence of a clear definition of the issue derives from the fact that narratives are ways of organizing events and human actions in a coherent form (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). This coherent form, however, is not value-free; rather, it aims to build legitimacy and models of behavior regarding a desired result of the situation (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Therefore, narratives always have a strong normative connotation, underlying a specific evaluation of the matter (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). In this sense, narratives always allow a clear and normative-driven definition of the object to emerge.

Furthermore, narratives aid in comprehending phenomena by incorporating characters involved, and illustrating their identities (Gabriel, 2000). However, as narratives inherently carry a normative evaluation of events and human actions, characters' identities are not neutral. Instead, they are assigned – implicitly or explicitly – archetypical and normative-driven identities such as heroes, villains, objects of desire, heroes' helpers, and villains' servants, establishing a Manichaean dualism between good and evil characters (Gross and Zilber, 2020; Gabriel, 2000).

In addition to normative judgment and the assignment of archetypal identity identities, narratives also present a plot. Thus, by describing the various subsequent events and the conflicts emerging among characters, narratives also illustrate the different desired end-states of each character, describing the goals that each character aspires to achieve in the story as well as the course of actions the characters plan to take to achieve them (Gabriel, 2000).

Relevant Information Emerging in Narratives to Understanding Stakeholders Perspectives

Narratives thus serve as efficient sensemaking tools by providing elements that reduce complexity and facilitate opinion construction – consisting of the definition of the issue, the presentation of characters with normatively-driven archetypical identities, and the illustration of the various characters' goals and (intended) courses of action.

In these paragraphs, we argue that these narrative elements make their examination in the context of the issue, and the assessment of which narrative each stakeholder embraces, useful for understanding each of their perspectives. We claim that narratives indeed illustrate stakeholders' perspectives on the issue because the above-mentioned elements they provide help access key insights regarding their view. These encompass a) the overall sentiment and assumptions about the issue, b) their objectives related to it and the expectations they have regarding others' behaviors, and c) their relationships within the context of the issue.

The sentiment and assumptions are closely linked to the definition of the issue as presented in the narrative. In narratives, the emerging definition unveils a pronounced normative connotation of the issue (Hardy and Maguire, 2010), thereby directly exposing the prevailing sentiment about it among those who reproduce it. However, it does not merely disclose the sentiment; since the definition characterizes the issue (Hardy and Maguire, 2010), it also reveals the perceived essence of the issue at hand.

Insights into stakeholders' objectives and expectations regarding the other stakeholders' behaviors are instead discerned from the goals and actions that characters have in the narratives. Narratives effectively portray each character's goals concerning the issue (Gabriel, 2000) and the intended sequence of actions to achieve those goals (Hardy and Maguire, 2010). However, when it comes to narratives about company-sensitive issues, these archetypical characters are not fictional but rather represent the stakeholders who are relevant to the issue. In other words, the villain of the narrative is an actual social actor in the real world, as is the hero, and so on. Therefore, narratives provide insight into the specific objectives of each stakeholder and the actions they intend to take to reach the desired end-state (Golant and Sillince, 2007). Notably, as narratives disclose this information for each stakeholder involved, they not only elucidate the objectives of the stakeholder reproducing the specific narrative but also illuminate what they perceive to be the objectives of other stakeholders. In essence, narratives serve the dual purpose of informing about stakeholders' objectives and revealing their expectations regarding the behaviors of others.

Finally, the characters portrayed through archetypical identities serve to characterize the relationships among stakeholders concerning a given issue (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). Narratives, in particular, illustrate three facets of the relationships between the stakeholders reproducing them and others involved: the cooperative or competitive nature of these relationships, the dynamics of influence, and the frequency of interactions.

Narratives often introduce archetypal characters framed within a good-evil spectrum, comprising a hero's side and a villain's side (Gabriel, 2000). This allows the identification of coalitions and oppositions, as stakeholders will be likely to consider allies those placed on the same side of the dualism of the narrative they reproduce, while those on the other side are viewed as opposition. However, the presentation of characters in archetypical identities not only reveals factions but also characterizes in-faction dynamics. Indeed, villains and heroes

are typically major characters, while heroes' helpers and villains' servants are the supporting characters (Gross and Zilber, 2020; Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Gabriel, 2000). As narratives depict relationships among these characters based on their identity roles, it becomes possible to infer influence dynamics, such as whether one stakeholder has an impact on another or is perceived as untrustworthy. Arguably, stakeholders aligning themselves with the hero's side of the spectrum are likely to distrust those on the opposite side while being influenced by those on the same side. Thus, narratives characterize not only coalitions and oppositions but also the influence dynamics within and among them. Lastly, narratives' archetypical identities offer insights into the frequency of interactions. According to Roulet and Bothello (2022), stakeholders who embrace the same narrative typically engage in more frequent and balanced interactions. In contrast, when stakeholders adopt contrasting narratives, interactions may become less frequent and more unbalanced. Thus, narratives characterize not only coalitions and oppositions and the influence dynamics among them, but also the frequency of interactions among stakeholders.

In summary, examining the narratives surrounding the issue and assessing which narrative each stakeholder reproduces can yield valuable insights for a profound understanding of stakeholders' perspectives on the issue. By defining the issue, these narratives illustrate stakeholder-specific sentiments and assumptions. Moreover, by depicting the characters' goals and intended courses of action, narratives reveal each stakeholder's objectives and expectations concerning others' behaviors. Finally, the introduction of the characters through archetypical identity roles makes narratives useful for assessing the complex nature of the relationships involved.

Introducing the Narrative-based Framework to Understanding Stakeholders

Based on this theoretical foundation, this section introduces the framework we have developed for exploring narratives surrounding the issue to gain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. Our proposed framework comprises three sequential steps: *Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue*; *Detecting the Narratives Reproduced*; and *Extracting Insights from the Narratives to Understanding Stakeholders*.

First Step – Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the Issue. In this phase, data are collected to gather the diverse opinions, arguments, and claims concerning the issue at hand. Various conversational arenas where social actors express their viewpoints are explored, encompassing both traditional media like newspapers and magazines, alongside new digital platforms and social media channels. Within these arenas, pivotal social actors who consistently engage with the issue by voicing their opinions are identified. Once these key stakeholders are identified, all texts authored by them pertaining to the issue are collected. Subsequently, these texts are examined to uncover references to other relevant social actors involved in the discourse. Employing a snowball sampling-like methodology, the texts of the additional social actors mentioned are collected as well. This approach results in the compilation of a comprehensive corpus of texts that embody all stakeholders' voices about the issue, articulating their opinions, arguments, and positions.

Second Step – Detecting the Narratives Reproduced. Once all the involved stakeholders' voices surrounding the issue are gathered, the objective is to detect diverse narratives reproduced and assess which one each stakeholder embraces. This entails examining each stakeholder group's texts about the issue to discern the narrative that emerges to make sense of and give meaning to the issue. To achieve this, the framework proposed by Hardy and Maguire (2010) should be adopted. In their narrative assessment framework, the authors suggest focusing on three elements: the characters' identities, the desired end-state of each, and the course of actions (intended) to pursue it. These elements also clarify the

definition of the issue underscored by the narrative. Following this framework, the assessment of the narrative reproduced by each stakeholder consists of identifying three elements in the gathered stakeholders' texts: a) the definition of the issue, b) the involved characters and their archetypical identities, and c) specific goals they harbor, along with the (intended) actions they plan to undertake to achieve them. This process results in the emergence of a narrative account of the issue for each stakeholder involved. Subsequently, interviews should be conducted with members of these social groups. Published texts may be strategic in their essence or limited to certain aspects of the issue, and interviews may be useful in validating the emerging narrative and clarifying potential grey areas in their texts. With this additional material, the narrative account of the issue of each stakeholder should be refined. By doing so, this second step produces the dual benefit of detecting all the narratives surrounding the issue and their elements, as well as assessing which each stakeholder embraces.

Third Step – Extracting Insights from the Narratives to Understanding Stakeholders. Once narratives have been detected, and an assessment of which narrative each stakeholder embraces has been conducted, the focus shifts to delineating an account of the various stakeholders' perspectives. This involves extracting from the narratives their sentiment and assumptions about the issue, their objectives and expectations of others' behaviors, as well as the relationships in place. Indeed, narratives provide essential elements that facilitate the emergence of these insights on stakeholders' perspectives. Firstly, narratives offer the definition that each stakeholder holds regarding the issue. From this definition, the overarching sentiment about it can be extracted, as the definition often implies a normative evaluation. Additionally, the definition characterizes the essence of the issue, revealing the fundamental assumptions made about it. Secondly, narratives elucidate characters' goals and intended courses of action. These elements help identify each stakeholder's objectives and expectations. Moreover, narratives not only reveal the goals and actions of the reproducing

stakeholders but also those of others. This allows for an assessment of the expectations that each stakeholder has regarding others' behaviors. Lastly, the characters' identities, highlighting archetypical identities, illustrate the relationships in place in terms of coalitions/oppositions, influence dynamics, and frequency of interaction. Characters aligned on the same side of the good/evil spectrum are likely to be allied, and vice versa. Similarly, they are likely to be influenced by those on the same side and to establish more frequent interactions with them compared to others. Therefore, by examining these narrative elements, a deeper understanding of stakeholders' perspectives and the dynamics of their relationships can be gained, facilitating more informed decision-making and stakeholder management strategies.

Applying the Narrative-based Framework to Understanding Stakeholders: The 5G Case Study

In the subsequent pages, we apply the proposed three-step framework to comprehend stakeholders' perspectives on the issue through a case study, specifically focusing on the introduction of 5G technologies in Italy.

Case Presentation and Motivation

'5G' refers to the fifth generation of telecommunication technology, and its introduction is anticipated to bring transformative advancements across various sectors. Consequently, the promise of its introduction has evoked significant enthusiasm among the population. However, the introduction of 5G technologies has also triggered concerns, mainly revolving around electromagnetic radiation. In response to these concerns, numerous institutions have sought scientific input to address the issue. Collectively, these scientific reports consistently indicate a lack of evidence supporting the idea that 5G poses any inherent danger when properly monitored and regulated. Consequently, governments have implemented specific

regulations for its introduction and, together with companies, have communicated assurances to the public regarding 5G's safety and monitoring. However, a large segment of the population remains convinced of its inherent danger. Various media outlets continue to disseminate officially debunked theories about 5G's supposed dangers. Meanwhile, anti-5G activist groups have organized themselves globally, often engaging in peaceful protests or, more rarely, even in confrontational acts, with some individuals resorting to attacking and setting fire to hundreds of 5G masts worldwide.

In essence, certain individuals remain skeptical of the reported facts on 5G from companies and institutions. According to these individuals, the regulations in place are deemed insufficient, and the reports on 5G safety are considered fake news propagated to reassure public opinion and serve specific interests at the expense of the population. These individuals have embraced their own collection of facts and alternative sources, resulting in divergent and incompatible beliefs and understandings of the 5G case at large.

Given the controversies it has sparked and the severe diverging sentiments, assumptions, objectives, and expectations, along with the set of relationships surrounding it, we believe the 5G case serves as a compelling case study to illustrate our approach and highlight the benefits of deep exploration of stakeholders' perspectives in today's polarized environments.

In the following pages, we illustrate how we applied our three-step framework to explore stakeholders' perspectives on the 5G case. As the aim of this conceptual paper is to introduce a stakeholder analysis framework rather than provide an extensive account of the 5G case and its dynamics, we opted to focus on the introduction of 5G in a single market — Italy. Indeed, while the analysis could yield different results if applied in different countries due to different dynamics surrounding the 5G case in different regions, our goal is to

showcase the overall benefits of understanding stakeholders, especially amidst today's polarization, and by focusing on a single country such as Italy — which exhibits characteristics related to polarization — we can achieve this objective while keeping the analysis manageable.

First step – Collecting Stakeholders' Voices around the 5G Issue

The objective of the first step is to gather diverse stakeholders' perspectives on the issue. This phase commenced in 2021, initiating our exploration of traditional and digital conversational arenas where discussions about 5G could arise. Specifically, we delved into social media platforms and media outlets using '5G' as the keyword for our search, allowing the most vocal stakeholders regarding the 5G issue to surface.

Through this exploration, two prominent stakeholder groups emerged as the most engaged with the issue: Telecommunication Companies advocating for 5G-based products and Activist Organizations opposing the 5G rollout. Upon identifying these groups, we visited their websites to collect all available texts related to the issue. Additionally, we scoured online media to uncover additional texts they may have published pertaining to 5G. Subsequently, we examined these texts to identify references to other social actors, leading to the emergence of 23 additional stakeholders spanning five stakeholder groups: Telecom Companies, Media Outlets, Public Institutions, Research Institutions, and Activist Organizations. Employing the same collection methodology, we gathered all available texts published by these stakeholders concerning 5G. At the conclusion of this step, we collected 116 texts from 25 stakeholders.

Step 2 – Detecting the Narratives Reproduced around 5G

Once the voices surrounding the issue are gathered, the objective of the second step is to detect the diverse narratives reproduced and ascertain which one each stakeholder embraces.

To detect the narratives reproduced by stakeholders, we organized the texts by authorship, categorizing stakeholders into five groups: Telecom Companies, Media Outlets, Public Institutions, Research Institutions, and Activist Organizations. Subsequently, we applied Hardy and Maguire's (2010) framework, focusing on character identities (such as the Hero, Villain, and supporting characters), their goals and intended courses of action, and the emerging definition of the issue. This narrative examination was conducted on the texts of each stakeholder group, resulting in raw narrative material. Towards the end of this phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 members of these stakeholder groups, including 3 telecom managers, 2 researchers, 1 institutional representative, 5 journalists, and 9 activists. During these interviews, our primary aim was to validate the emerging narratives by discussing stakeholders' understanding of 5G, their desires, and their views and relationships with other involved social actors.

We then compared the interview data with our initial narrative examination results, allowing us to solidify our understanding of the narratives each stakeholder group was reproducing. This iterative process resulted in the emergence of three distinct narratives about 5G reproduced by different sets of stakeholder groups.

The first narrative, '5G as a Game–Changing Positive Revolution', was embraced by Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, and Public Institutions. The second emerging narrative, '5G as a Deathly Threat' was adopted by Activist Organizations (No5G), Alternative Media Outlets, and Small Public Institutions. Lastly, a third minor narrative, '5G as a Technology to Monitor and Use Properly', was mainly supported by Research Institutions.

Notably, the assessment of the narratives further segmented the stakeholder groups identified in the previous step, expanding from 5 to 7 stakeholder groups. While organizations

within the ‘Telecom Companies’, ‘Activist Organization’, and ‘Research Institutions’ groups consistently aligned with the same narratives, we subdivided the ‘Public Institutions’ and ‘Media Outlets’ groups into ‘Public Institutions’ and ‘Small Public Institutions,’ and ‘Mainstream Media Outlets’ and ‘Alternative Media Outlets’. Indeed, major public institutions, such as large city municipalities or the Parliament, articulated different narratives compared to smaller public institutions like small city municipalities. This distinction also applied to well-established mainstream magazines and journals versus smaller, alternative media outlets engaged in ‘counter-information’.

The table below summarizes the elements of the three narratives. In the following paragraphs, we will describe them in more detail, presenting the results of this second phase.

[TABLE I]

The prevailing narrative defines 5G as a ‘Game–Changing Positive Revolution’ and it is co–produced by Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, and Public Institutions. 5G is perceived as a revolutionary innovation that benefits individuals and businesses with assured safety (Telecom Manager 3, Telecom Companies, Interview; Journalist 1, Mainstream Media Outlets, Interview). Telecommunication Companies are thus the heroes of this story as they facilitate 5G’s proliferation, crucial for Italy’s economy and society (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 19/04/20). Public and Research Institutions, as well as Mainstream Media Outlets also want 5G introduction, thus playing a supporting role in the narratives, acting as the heroes’ helpers. Public Institutions streamline authorization processes for 5G coverage infrastructures (Italian Government, Public Institutions, 2021) and help educate the public, particularly regarding the proliferation of 5G–related fake news and disinformation (Parliamentary Document, Public Institutions, 2020). Research Institutions provide evidence–based studies disproving health concerns related to 5G (Telecom Manager

2, Telecom Companies, Interview). Mainstream Media Outlets play a vital role in disseminating accurate information about 5G (Journalist 2, Mainstream Media Outlets, Interview). Anti-5G Activist Organizations occupy the other side of the heroes–villain spectrum, baselessly associating 5G with conspiracy theories (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 12/04/20 and 17/08/21), that obstruct 5G technology's introduction. Those villains, however, are not alone. They are aided by Alternative Media Outlets that spread this 5G-related misinformation, and by Small Public Institutions that pay attention to their unbacked beliefs, thus hindering the country's technological progress (La Repubblica, Mainstream Media Outlets, 19/04/2020).

The second narrative portrays '5G as a Deathly Threat' and it is reproduced by Activist Organizations (No5G), Alternative Media Outlets, and Small Public Institutions. It depicts anti-5G activists as heroes opposing the introduction of this technology. They argue that 5G radiation poses health risks (AIS5G, Activist Organizations, 01/20) and that serves as a tool for governments and corporations to manipulate and control the population (Activist 4, Activist Organizations, interview). In this narrative, the villains are telecommunications companies driven by profit, seemingly willing to compromise public health for their interests (Inquinamento Italia, Alternative Media Outlets, website). Public and Research Institutions are portrayed as their allies, allegedly influenced by telecom companies to emphasize 5G's importance for progress and innovation, suggesting conflicts of interest (Activist 2, Activist Organizations, interview). Mainstream Media Outlets are implicated too, accused of spreading biased information to please advertising investors, primarily Telecom Companies (Activists 1 and 3, Activist Organizations, interviews). To counter these perceived villains and their allies, anti-5G activists are helped by Alternative Media Outlets and 'independent scientists'. The former aids by providing counter–information that depicts 5G as an "inescapable mass experiment" (Byo Blu, Alternative Media Outlets, 23/08/21), and the latter helps by

conducting unbiased studies on 5G's dangers, free from Telecom Companies' funding (Inquinamento Italia, Alternative Media Outlets, website).

The third narrative presents '5G as a Technology to Monitor and Use Properly' and it is mainly reproduced by Research Institutions, who are portrayed as heroes in this minority perspective, actively researching and educating the public about 5G. They emphasize the need for ongoing research and surveillance of the technology, but assert that, as of now, no evidence supports 5G as a threat to human health or freedom. Consequently, they consider the extreme polarization in public opinion unwarranted, with the villains being those who take uncompromising stances on 5G. In other words, the researchers argue that the emotional charge in the public discussion is not aligned with the scientific evidence, creating a divide between scientific reality and public opinion (Researcher 2, Research Institutions, interview). In this narrative, anti-5G Activist Organizations opposing 5G without scientific basis are portrayed as villains, criticized for their emotional bias and singular focus on 5G's perceived drawbacks (Researcher 1, Research Institutions, interview). Telecom Companies, while less culpable, can also be seen as villains for prioritizing 5G's advantages over potential risks, driven by profit motives that might lead to downplaying safety concerns (Researcher 2, Research Institutions, interview).

Step 3 – Extracting Information from the Narratives to Understanding Stakeholders

Once narratives have been detected and an assessment of which narrative each stakeholder embraces has been conducted, it becomes possible to discern stakeholders' sentiments, assumptions about the issue, objectives and expectations of others' behaviors, and the relationships in place.

To achieve this, we specifically considered the definition of the issue emerging from the narrative to assess the sentiments and assumptions made about 5G. Subsequently, we

examined the characters' goals and actions in the reproduced narrative to highlight each stakeholder's objectives and the expectations they have regarding others' behaviors. Lastly, we analyzed the characters' identities to explore the relationships in place.

In this section, we will illustrate the insight-extraction phase in detail by examining the narratives of two selected stakeholders: Telecom Companies and Activist Organizations. This involves extracting insights from the narratives they reproduce to gain a deeper understanding. While we provide this illustration for two stakeholders for the sake of conciseness, this approach could be applied to every stakeholder mentioned.

Table II provides a summary of the results of this process, offering a visual representation of the information extracted from the narratives embraced by the two selected stakeholder groups. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the results of this phase in detail for each of the two stakeholder groups individually.

[TABLE II]

Telecom Companies. The narrative reproduced and embraced by Telecom Companies is the mainstream one, defining 5G as a Game-Changing Positive Revolution. The emerging definition thus highlights a positive sentiment about the issue. The assumption behind it is that 5G is simply seen as a part of naturally occurring technological developments, although with a potentially massive positive impact on people's lives.

Based on the idea of 5G as a Game-Changing Positive Revolution, the goal of Telecom Companies in that narrative is to spread its use by marketing 5G–based products. In the pursuit of their objective of introducing 5G, they expect Public Institutions to help them by providing infrastructure and a secure regulatory flow, Research Institutions to prove not only the technical advancement that 5G brings but also its safety, and the Mainstream Media Outlets to promote the advantages of 5G introduction. However, they also expect Activist

Organizations to counter the 5G introduction either by spreading fake news or engaging in confrontational acts. Also, they expect the Alternative Media Outlets to support Activist Organizations in the spread of fake news and Small Public Institutions to listen to activists' concerns and rule accordingly.

The narrative also informs about the relationships that Companies have in place with the other stakeholders. Specifically, the presentation of involved stakeholders through archetypical identities highlights that they perceive themselves to be part of a coalition composed of Public and Research institutions, Mainstream Media Outlets, and themselves, which opposes the group that gathers Small Public Institutions, Alternative Media Outlets, and Activist Organizations. Regarding influence dynamics, Telecom Companies are influenced by both Public and Research Institutions. Public Institutions are instrumental in facilitating 5G introduction in terms of ruling and infrastructure provision, giving the latter significant influence over Companies. Research Institutions play a vital role in conducting studies that confirm 5G's safety and benefits, thus having the potential to influence companies' views on the pursuit of spreading the use of 5G technologies. The narratives also reveal that some stakeholders do not significantly impact companies' views. Activist Organizations and Alternative Media Outlets are seen as untrustworthy. Activists are considered uninformed and thus their views are not regarded as relevant, though not necessarily disingenuous. Alternative Media Outlets are viewed as primarily driven by financial gain, making their perspectives untrustworthy and unable to influence companies' opinions. Narratives also suggest that companies' interactions are more frequent with stakeholders sharing the same narrative, such as Mainstream Media Outlets and Public Institutions. Conversely, their interaction with Activist Organizations, Alternative Media Outlets, and Small Public Institutions is sporadic or virtually nonexistent.

Activist Organizations. The narrative that this stakeholder group embraces and reproduces defines 5G as a Deadly Threat. Consequently, their sentiment towards 5G is sharply negative, assuming that the introduction of this technology is a danger to the population that only favors the interest of a few at the expense of many.

Given these premises, their goal is to impede its introduction by spreading information regarding its danger and engaging in confrontational acts if needed. In pursuing this objective, they expect to count on Alternative Media Outlets' support as informational platforms and Small Public Institutions to listen to their concerns. On the other side, they expect Telecom Companies to hide the side effects of the new technology, and Research Institutions and Mainstream Media Outlets to help the industry by spreading fake news regarding 5G safety and utility. Similarly, they expect Public Institutions to collaborate with Companies to spread the use of 5G.

Therefore, the narrative also shows what the perceived coalitions and opposition are according to the Activists Organizations. Indeed, Alternative Media Outlets and Small Public Institutions are their allies, while Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research Institutions, and Public Institutions contrast them. Regarding influence dynamics, Activist Organizations are likely to be influenced by Alternative Media Outlets activities on the matter. In fact, they share the same assumptions about 5G and therefore consider them to be a trustworthy source of information regarding it. On the contrary, Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research and Public institutions are not likely to influence activists' opinions on the matter. According to the narrative they embrace, indeed, Companies have a huge conflict of interest on 5G and therefore are not credible. The other stakeholders, instead, are not credible as they serve the Telecom Companies, probably because they are paid to do so – according to this narrative. In terms of interaction, Activist Organizations tend to have frequent 5G-related interactions with Alternative Media Outlets, given that they share

the same narrative about the topic; while they only have sporadic interactions with Telecom Companies, Mainstream Media Outlets, Research and Public institutions as they do not embrace the same narrative.

Discussion and Conclusion

Stakeholder analysis, consisting of the identification, understanding, and prioritization of stakeholders, is a fundamental element contributing to effective stakeholder engagement (Koschmann, 2016; Mitchell and Lee, 2019). Nonetheless, while some even claim that stakeholder engagement should start from comprehending stakeholders' perspectives (Hutt, 2010), extant frameworks for stakeholder analysis have often overlooked this crucial understanding component (Mitchell and Lee, 2019). The absence of analytical tools to grasp stakeholders' perspectives is indeed critical as overlooking the understanding phase may introduce biases into the overarching analysis, as it would solely reflect the focal organization's viewpoint. Moreover, failing to conduct this phase is particularly problematic in today's landscape, given the increasingly divergent views characterizing today's polarized societies.

Against this backdrop, this paper proposes a framework aimed at enhancing the stakeholder analysis process by delving into stakeholders' perspectives on issues through an examination of discursive processes surrounding the subject. Specifically, we introduce a three-step framework involving the collection of narratives related to the issue to extract insights pertinent to understanding stakeholders' perspective — namely their sentiments and assumptions, their objectives and expectations of others' behavior, and their relationships regarding the issue.

Naturally, this framework bears certain limitations. First, while its utility may extend across various contexts, its efficacy is particularly pronounced in scenarios characterized by

sharp polarization among stakeholders, as the benefits are commensurate with the divergence in stakeholders' perspectives. Secondly, this framework operates on specific theoretical underpinnings, emphasizing that understandings evolve through discursive processes and thus must be evaluated within stakeholders' discourses and claims. Nevertheless, some stakeholders' communications may be strategic in nature, occasionally diverging from genuine understanding in pursuit of strategic objectives. Consequently, interviews emerge as a crucial component of the framework, allowing us to delve deeper into stakeholders' understanding, and thereby validating the insights gleaned from textual analysis. Additionally, we acknowledge the significant investment in terms of time, effort, and expertise required by the analytical framework we propose. Nonetheless, this is justified by the granular understanding it provides of stakeholders' perspectives. Similar to other frameworks that analyze stakeholders relationally based on the issue rather than in absolute terms, the increased effort is indeed compensated by the enhanced reliability and practical value of the analysis.

Beyond the limitations inherent in the proposed approach and ways to address them, we contend that its introduction offers both managerial and conceptual advantages.

Managerial Implications: Leveraging Stakeholder Understanding in Stakeholder Analysis

The proposed framework provides managers with a tool to assess the perspectives of various stakeholders, thereby augmenting the likelihood of fostering constructive dialogue and achieving successful engagement outcomes. Effective stakeholder engagement indeed hinges upon establishing a clear dialogue, and unknown fundamental assumptions and beliefs among involved parties often obstruct effective communication, leading to uncertainty, delegitimization behaviors, and misunderstandings (Brønn and Brønn, 2003).

Beyond the overarching advantages of understanding stakeholders' viewpoints, however, developing an informed understanding of stakeholders' perspectives through the proposed framework enhances the stakeholder analysis process also by improving both the identification and prioritization phases.

Regarding identification, the proposed framework facilitates more precise segmentation of relevant stakeholders. Certain stakeholders, seemingly belonging to the same group, may have different expectations, objectives, and sentiments about the issue, and should therefore be considered separately when preparing engagement strategies. The proposed framework enables such granularity by exploring the differing narratives embraced by stakeholders. Our illustrative case exemplifies this, revealing, for instance, that the overarching stakeholder group of "Media Outlets" should be subdivided into "Mainstream" and "Alternative" media outlets, each endorsing opposing narratives. Thus, this approach refines stakeholder identification by ensuring the coherence of considered groups.

In terms of prioritization, understanding stakeholders' perspectives enhances their characterization by enabling managers to overcome potential biases stemming from solely considering the focal organization's viewpoint. For example, this framework in fact aids in bridging expectation gaps between a focal organization and stakeholders by clarifying stakeholders' objectives, thus mitigating reliance solely on managerial intuition in defining them (Mitchell and Lee, 2019). Furthermore, it sheds light on power and influence dynamics, crucial for effective characterization and subsequent prioritization, as it indicates the sources each stakeholder deems trustworthy. For instance, this insight may guide managers on whether to engage directly or indirectly with stakeholders based on influence assessments. In our illustrative example, our framework reveals that national-level public institutions should refrain from direct communication with activists but may engage with them indirectly, perhaps through small municipalities.

Therefore, the narrative approach to stakeholder analysis enhances the likelihood of successful engagement not only by minimizing misunderstandings through better comprehension of stakeholders' perspectives, thus laying the groundwork for constructive communication, but also by improving the quality of stakeholder identification and characterization.

In this regard, the proposed framework is not intended to replace other analytical approaches to analyze stakeholders but to complement them, enriching the overarching stakeholder analysis. Similarly, it is meant to complement, rather than serve as an alternative to, existing works illustrating micro-communication strategies (see Palmieri and Mazzali-Lurati, 2021) or approaches to discursive relationship building (see Schormair and Gilbert, 2021) that companies should adopt within complex landscapes. The narrative approach to understanding stakeholders is indeed instrumental in enhancing the analysis phase and guiding the development of effective communication engagement strategies and activities. Indeed, in our polarized society, stakeholders often harbor divergent assumptions, leading to disparate interpretations of objective truth regarding the issue at hand. By assessing the narratives embraced by stakeholders, we can discern basic assumptions, thereby enabling the tailoring of engagement activities accordingly. In our case study, the assessment of narratives shaping activists' understanding illustrates that, for example, public institutions should not attempt to persuade them with expert reports, as activists do not trust experts as public institutions do. Acknowledging this insight would assist managers in avoiding futile endeavors such as merely publicizing expert reports and instead focusing, for example, on rebuilding activists' trust in experts. In essence, an understanding of stakeholder perspectives serves as a necessary foundation for developing communication engagement activities in a polarized environment.

Theoretical Implications: Advancing Systemic Stakeholder Thinking

Conceptually, we posit that the introduction of this narrative analytical framework holds value in fostering a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). Recently, scholars have advocated for a systemic approach to the study and management of stakeholders. This approach entails two key aspects. First, it emphasizes the need to move beyond viewing stakeholder relationships as dyadic and instead consider the complex networks of multiple relationships within stakeholder systems (Koschmann, 2016). Construing relationships strictly as one-to-one connection between a stakeholder and a focal organization indeed fails to capture the complexity of the interconnected relationships among stakeholders themselves, resulting in less nuanced analysis and consequently less successful engagement outcomes (Rowley, 1997; Lurati and Mariconda, 2015). Second, a systemic approach suggests reconceptualizing stakeholders as being concerned with an issue rather than with a specific firm (Roulet and Bothello, 2022). In other words, this perspective positions the issue, rather than companies, at the center of the stakeholder system (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). By doing so, companies can glean more insightful information from their analysis, including an understanding of the functions within the ecosystem or the dynamic collective organizing of different stakeholders to achieve common goals (Roulet and Bothello, 2022).

While a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking has been advocated conceptually, analytical tools that embrace this theoretical orientation are limited. The proposed framework for comprehending stakeholders' perspectives addresses this gap in the literature.

On one hand, our analytical framework, by focusing on the discursive processes surrounding the issue in analyzing stakeholders, enables the examination of the complex interconnected relationships between a focal organization and stakeholders, as well as among other stakeholders. By exploring the narratives about the issue and assessing which one each stakeholder embraces, the relationships in place that stakeholders have can be acknowledged,

transcending the limited view of analyses that consider only the relationships of a focal organization. In this sense, our framework helps overcome a dyadic approach to stakeholder analysis, supporting a relational approach to understanding stakeholder systems (Koschmann, 2016).

On the other hand, the narrative approach nurtures a systemic approach to stakeholder thinking by focusing the analysis on the issue rather than centering the focal organization, effectively placing the issue at the center of the analysis. Indeed, our framework examines the narratives related to the issue to understand stakeholder perspectives, treating all stakeholders equally. This approach avoids singling out any one stakeholder as the central figure in the ecosystem and biases the analysis by considering its perspective as the central (and perhaps only) one.

In this sense, the narrative approach serves also to avoid placing organizational assumptions, beliefs, experiences, and taken-for-granted truths at the center of the ecosystem, a crucial aspect in today's polarized landscape. Indeed, organizations and managers can no longer presume that their assumptions and factual information are universally shared across all stakeholders, as today's environments are populated with multiple and contrasting assumptions and facts (Meyer and Vaara, 2020). Stakeholder management must, therefore, employ frameworks that recognize the complexity and sharp divergence of today's understanding to avoid conducting biased or myopic analyses. We hope that the proposed narrative approach to stakeholder analysis may represent a step in this direction.

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