



Web-mediated Stakeholder Communication in the Biotech Industry: the Discursive Construction of Dialogic Illusion

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1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The rise of computer mediated communication (CMC) has brought new, exciting prospects, but also new challenges and complexities, to the corporate communication and public relations functions of companies large and small. The advent of Web 2.0, with its interactional affordances, has undoubtedly opened up unprecedented opportunities for companies to engage with their stakeholders. Social media in particular have been at the centre of a growing body of literature which focuses specifically on the potential benefits of such affordances. For instance, it has been claimed that social media “allow firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 67), thereby encouraging increased communication. This can be especially valuable for purposes such as reputation management (Jones et al. 2010: 930), improvement of companies’ engagement with stakeholders (Waters et al. 2009), and monitoring of the external environment (Gonzales-Herrero and Smith 2008: 143). Social media have also been credited with being effective crisis communication tools



(Gonzales-Herrero and Smith 2008; Schultz et al. 2011), as they provide direct, unfiltered communication channels capable of bringing the company's voice directly to its key constituencies. Many of these remarks can be extended to other forms of computer mediated communication which, while not being "social" *strictu sensu* (i.e. not being in themselves hosted on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook to name but the best known ones in the Western world), enable two-way communication and may warrant expectations of prompt replies. The comment section on blogs, for instance, is one such example; open commentaries on videos posted on public platforms such as YouTube are another – the point being the exploitation of a dialogic potential which is enabled by CMC in its various forms.

If the potential benefits are indeed unprecedented, so are also the challenges posed by CMC. Social media require constant monitoring and feeding, and their sharing features make it possible for both positive and negative news to go viral in no time, often compounding, rather than hedging, reputational risk (Pekka 2010). Gauging the ideal amount of web or social media presence can also be particularly challenging for companies – too much information being often received as unfavourably as too little information. Through the new media, moreover, criticism and dissent have also found an avenue for becoming ever easier to express and more widespread, thus increasing the potential for lasting reputation damage or image tarnishing.

All these aspects – both positive and negative – are especially relevant when considering the specific needs and challenges of communication on topics relating to Corporate Social Responsibility, or CSR. Corporate social responsibility has been variously defined over the years; a recent paper by Sheehy (2015) argues that the key shared feature of the various definitions in use is a focus on self-regulation – which means that corporations voluntarily agree to be driven by ethical constraints in the pursuance of profit. These self-imposed (but driven by society's increasingly demanding expectations) ethical constraints apply to all aspects of business – from its environmental impact to the well-being of its employees, as well as of local communities and society at large. Much emphasis is placed on sustainability, typically paired with development, especially if the companies operate in developing countries. This approach is often summed up in the motto "doing well by doing good", which highlights the win-win proposition underlying the CSR paradigm.

More in general, CSR has to do with social legitimation. Gaining a "social licence to operate" (a notion originally developed to deal with the social and environmental challenges faced by the mining industry, but later extended to other fields; cf. Moffat et al. 2016), and hence reducing reputational risk, is especially important in contested industries such as – amongst others – those belonging to the field of agrobiotechnologies, well known representatives of which are Monsanto, Bayer Crop Science and Syngenta. Companies operating in this field have adopted the CSR paradigm as the dominant interpretative scheme for their operations, which they have come to frame, in their communication, as purely altruistic efforts to solve mankind's most pressing problems – most notably the need to feed a growing population while conserving natural resources, preserving the environment, and ensuring sustainable



development (including social progress).

The adoption of strategies of identity construction and promotion based on CSR principles and discourses on the part of agrobiotech giants has not been without criticism. In fact, the industry as a whole, as well as its most notorious representatives (first and foremost Monsanto) has often been under attack precisely because its practices are seen by its detractors as being eminently irresponsible, representing a threat to the environment, to human health, and to social development, especially in developing economies.

Within this scenario, the agrobiotech sector has put up a huge communication effort to try and persuade sceptics and opponents of its fundamental social beneficence and environmental friendliness. For the most part, this communication effort has met with only partial success. Opinions on GMO and industrial agriculture continue to be polarized. Part of the problem may have been due – as with most corporate communication – to the monologic and monodirectional nature of much of the communication produced by these corporations. Their deafness to the concerns voiced by environmental activists and concerned citizens has caused the rift between the industry and its detractors to widen. The advent of forms of computer mediated communication enabling dialogic interaction, however, has created the conditions – it is argued – for more meaningful interaction with stakeholders in all areas of corporate communication, and especially for communication involving legitimation and the establishment and consolidation of a company's licence to operate.

A shift from stakeholder communication to stakeholder dialogue – which is arguably facilitated by recourse to interactive media as the preferred means of communication (see, amongst others, Colleoni 2013, Fieseler and Fleck 2013, Vernuccio 2014) – is generally believed to be essential to the development of socially responsible policies and practices, primarily because such development can only be possible if greater attention is paid to participatory communication processes “that use situations of conflict and difference to generate creative win-win responses” (Deetz 2007: 277). The need to build on, and overcome, the perceived inherent tension (and often contradiction) between “doing good” and “doing well” (Burchell and Cook 2006; Deetz 2007; van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2008), makes the call for conflict-resolving dialogue even more pressing, and an essential step towards legitimation. Castelló et al. (2013) go so far as claim that “as dissent and polarization are fundamental to the dynamics of CSR”, legitimacy should be analysed “as a construct that emerges in interactions during the communicative constitution of CSR and in the interplay of dissent and consensus” (Castelló et al. 2013: 689).

Hence the importance of CMC, and in particular of the use of dialogue-enabling media, in corporate CSR communication. If, however, such use holds much promise – at least in theory – it also entails a degree of risk. It should not be forgotten, as Etter (2013: 608) points out, that “communicating with stakeholders about CSR is a risky business”:

the same features of social media that hold the promise for better stakeholder relationships, such as open access, interaction, and transparency, might ironically prevent corporations from striving for interaction with stakeholders about CSR issues. (Etter 2013: 608)



In other words, while engaging in dialogic practices is an opportunity for companies to truly interact with their publics, it also enables the latter to challenge corporations, demand more open disclosure, and attempt to affect corporate decision making in ways which may go in different directions than the ones envisaged by the companies (Holder-Webb et al. 2009).

In light of the above, it may be expected that stakeholder dialogue be especially important for companies whose core business makes them vulnerable to criticism on the part of the public at large, and which have faced a history of reproof and occasional boycott. Companies operating in the field of agro-biotechnologies fit this description. Located at the intersection of science and technology on one side, and society and the environment on the other, they are at the centre of one of the most divisive sociotechnical controversies of all times. Of them, Monsanto is possibly the best known, and probably the most vilified. The company has long pursued a policy of educating the public about the benefits of its proprietary technologies as part of its overall strategy of constructing an eminently socially responsible persona for itself. Such education has recently been framed in dialogic terms, and has been institutionalized in a dedicated area in the company website called "The Conversation". At the time of writing this essay, Monsanto was in the process of being acquired by Bayer, whose agrotechnology division, Bayer Crop Science, has also been subjected to considerable criticism, though not quite as much as Monsanto. Both companies (now a single entity) have implemented forms of communication potentially open to dialogic interaction with their publics. The aim of this study is to investigate such forms of communication with a view to verifying if and to what extent 1) they exploit the dialogic affordances of the medium in which they are embedded and 2) they encourage or inhibit dialogic engagement by means of discursive and rhetorical structuring.

2. STUDY DESIGN

As hinted above, the research follows a two-pronged approach. First, it provides a description of a selection of the computer mediated communication strategies enacted by the two companies to engage with their publics, and attempts to assess whether they succeed in fostering dialogic interaction; second, it investigates the rhetorical structuring of selected samples of the companies' communication with a view to identifying linguistic evidence of their dialogic openness or foreclosure.

The study is qualitative in focus and analyses only selected samples of the corporate communication deployed by the two companies considered. In particular, the investigation is limited to instances of corporate communication which explicitly purport to want to establish a dialogue with the general public on matters which are the object of frequent questions or debate. For Monsanto, the "Conversation" section of the corporate website is analysed; for Bayer Crop Science, the text of the introductory video to its "Transparency Initiative" is examined in detail. While



considerably different in terms of scope, interactional potential and medium deployed, both texts instantiate what their respective authors mean by *dialogue*, and what form of interaction they want (or are willing) to establish with their publics. The materials, therefore, have not been selected by virtue of the fact that they are dialogic in themselves, but because they conceptualise dialogue as a valuable form of interaction with their audiences and purport to encourage and indeed actively pursue dialogic interaction. To establish whether they do so, and if so, how, is one of the aims of the study.

The methodological toolkit used for the analysis is discourse-analytical in nature and draws on multiple traditions of linguistic and rhetorical analysis, including Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) for the analysis of interpersonal resources, and on argumentation theory (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; Walton 2007) for the exploration of the argumentative and rhetorical strategies deployed in the service of persuasion in respect of corporate goodwill and commitment. The latter strategies in particular are investigated with a view to detecting implicit forms of dialogism which may encourage (or inhibit) response.

3. TALKING ONE'S WAY INTO LEGITIMATION

3.1. *Interactional affordances and two-way communication*

Both Monsanto and Bayer Crop Science have a strong online presence which spans multiple communication avenues and web-mediated genres. Besides their corporate websites, they have Facebook and Twitter accounts which they update regularly, and which enable comments. They also have YouTube accounts, which gather all the videos that also appear on the websites, and to which tweets often redirect. Comments, however, are disabled for Monsanto videos (they are not for Bayer Crop Science videos, but the function does not seem to be exploited at all by viewers). The reason for this is provided by Monsanto in one of the answers to questions from the public featured in its "Conversation" section on the corporate website:

- 1) Why have you disabled comments for your Youtube videos??
from Kim S.

Hi, Kim, thanks for your question. Because we often receive a lot of spam and inappropriate comments in the YouTube comments section, we don't feel the platform allows for a productive conversation with the community. That's partly why we started the Conversation, a site that enables anyone who has questions about us to submit what's on their minds. Feel free to ask any other questions you have, and we will do our best to answer you.
(<https://monsanto.com/company/media/q/why-have-you-disabled-comments-for-your-youtube-videos/>)



This question-answer pair not only provides an explanation for the absence of interactivity on Monsanto's YouTube channel, but also reveals Monsanto's overall attitude towards unchecked interaction. The YouTube platform is deemed inadequate for a "productive conversation"; as a result, Monsanto has established an alternative way of enabling such conversation – not surprisingly, one on which the company can exercise gatekeeping and control.

The exchange reported in (1) above sets the stage for the type of interaction which may be expected to be found in the "Conversation" section of Monsanto's website. The "Conversation" is presented as an open forum where people are encouraged to post their questions, whatever they are:

2) Ask Us Anything

Talking. Listening. Asking questions. Communication is at the heart of agriculture.

Sharing what works. And what doesn't. Passing down hard-earned knowledge.

Building on that tradition with technology.

To continue that open dialogue, we created this forum. Have a question about GMOs? Conserving resources? Internships? Just ask.

While you're here, browse past questions from people who care about the same things you do.

The passage opens with an imperative which solicits the response of the reader and seems to imply complete openness on the part of the company ("anything"). The following lines insist on the bi-directionality of communication ("talking" – "listening"), and hint at the co-construction of knowledge ("Sharing what works. And what doesn't."), but the text then goes on to reproduce conventional patterns of knowledge transmission from the expert to the layperson. The questions which are suggested by way of examples do appear to cover potentially challenging issues ("Have a question about GMOs?"), but the textual stretches both preceding and following this question are characterised by exclusively positive semantic prosodies (i.e. they feature lexical choices which are typically deployed in contexts where positive evaluations are encouraged; cf. Sinclair 1991). Such positive sketches more than counter the negative potential of the question. Thus, the passage does encourage participation, but implicitly suggests that positive contributions are preferred; and while "anything" can be asked, the Submission Policy clarifies that "Monsanto reserves the right to limit or prohibit the posting of any Submission" (<https://monsanto.com/news-stories/conversation/submission-policy/>), thereby maintaining a strong gatekeeping control on whatever conversation the public decides to initiate.

This approach is confirmed by the answers Monsanto posted to a number of published questions relating to this aspect:

- 3) How valid is "conversation" if Monsanto reserves the right to limit or prohibit submissions?
from Elaine D.



Hi, Elaine, thanks for your question. We thought long and hard about the rules and format of this Q&A function. We decided that the best format is provide [sic] a safe and informative online space for people to ask us their questions about Monsanto and the company's role in the food we eat.

You can read about what questions we will not answer in our submission policy but we are committed to responding to all legitimate questions that follow our submission policy.

Monsanto's answer suggests that the "conversation" is not a true dialogue. It is a "safe and informative online space" (where the key word is the pre-modifier *informative*), where knowledge is transferred from the company to the reader, but where there is no room for debate or argument. Only "legitimate" questions will be answered. The company's commitment is not to dialogue, but to conditional response. The deliberative (mental) process which lead to the format of the "Conversation" is described in detail ("*we thought* long and hard"... "*we decided* the best format is"... "*we are committed* to responding"; emphases added), with Monsanto taking responsibility for every single step (notice the use of *we* as a subject in mental clauses, two of the cognitive type, and one of the desiderative type – cf. Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 210). The only negative statement ("*we will not answer*") is embedded in a constituent element of a higher-ranking syntactic structure whose subject is the interlocutor ("you"). This higher-ranking structure features a modal verb of ability/permission ("*can read*"): the modulation (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 618) metaphorically conveys a form of low subjective obligation characterized by implicit orientation (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 622) which constitutes a proposal (an invite) to engage in conversation. It is interpersonal and right-conferring (as opposed to the right-restricting approach of the "Conversation"), but only in order to communicate the terms of the constraints to effective dialogue. In other words, Monsanto embeds dialogic closure within an interpersonally framed dialogic opening.

The contradiction implicit in Monsanto's one-way approach to conversation does not go unnoticed. Example (4) provides yet another question-answer pair relating to this topic:

- 4) You say you want a conversation, so why haven't you allowed for open dialogue and comments around each question?
from Marcus J.

Hi, Marcus. Good question. Our goal on this site is to answer people's questions about who we are and what we do, and to make that information available to other people who may have similar questions. We put a lot of thought into the best format for answering and organizing a wide range of questions. To make the content easy to find and read for everyone who visits the site, we decided to focus on the current Q&A format. We hope that makes sense.

While the question is not censored, the reply provided by Monsanto is hardly to the point: in fact, it reinforces the idea that rather than fostering a two-way conversation,



Monsanto aims to provide information about itself, but in a format which readers can relate to more easily. The close of the reply ("We hope that makes sense") represents an informal strategy of (partly apologetic) confirmation seeking, but it also betrays a degree of awareness that there is indeed a difference between conversation and purely explanatory responses to information seeking questions.

No such explicit debate about allowable contributions to the dialogue initiated by the company is to be found on the Byern Crop Science website. There are no indications that the company may constrain contributions; however, the sections of the website which may be expected to encourage comments (there is one featuring a number of blogs with the comment function enabled) are remarkably empty. Equally deserted (at the time of writing this paper) appear to be the comment function on the "Transparency Initiative" video, which is featured on YouTube. While there is no sign indicating that the dialogic intent may not be genuine, establishing a two-way communication seems to be difficult, either because the intended interlocutors are unwilling to engage in company-initiated conversations, or because (in the case of Monsanto) the company is reluctant to provide answers to challenging questions.

3.2. THE RHETORICAL FRAMING OF ENGAGEMENT

3.2.1. *The discursive construction of allowable contributions: Monsanto's "Conversation"*

This latter point deserves further discussion, and again Monsanto's Conversation is a good starting point for the analysis. Amongst the questions which Monsanto chooses to answer, some are purely of the information seeking kind. See, for instance, the following examples:

- 5) Are all GMO's "Round Up Ready"?
from Amanda H.

Hi Amanda,
Not all GMOs are part of the Roundup Ready® system. Roundup Ready® crops are one brand of glyphosate-tolerant crops, and have been enhanced through biotechnology to no longer be susceptible to glyphosate, a commonly used herbicide. Corn, soybean, cotton, canola, sugar beet and alfalfa are all examples of crops that have some glyphosate-tolerant varieties.
There are GMOs that are developed to resist herbicides (like Roundup Ready®), but also many others that are developed for different purposes, such as: drought resistance, insect resistance, nutritional enhancements, and food waste reduction. This article at GMOAnswers.com has more information on the types of GMOS available to farmers: <https://gmoanswers.com/gmo-basics>

- 6) Who do i contact about a monsanto number to purchase RR corn? We are planting for wildlife, not production. Supervisor had number,



retired
from Kevin L.

To purchase Roundup Ready products, please visit
<http://www.roundupreadyplus.com/contactus>

Example (5) features a request for information to which an appropriate response is given. The expository text produced by Monsanto functionally meets the requirements of the “answer to a request for information” text, and deploys typical features of scientific popularization (Calsamiglia and Van Dijk 2004), including explanatory glosses entailing both reformulation and exemplification (Hyland 2007). Example (6) also provides the information requested, which is necessary to initiate a course of action aimed at concluding a purchase.

With reference to Example (5), it is worth pointing out that the type of dialogic interaction featured shares some key features with what in media studies have been called “expert interviews” (Montgomery 2007: 170), i.e. interviews “designed to elucidate the event or topic [...] by providing ‘background’ through eliciting supplementary information, elucidating unfamiliar concepts, spelling out the implications of a development or providing independent comment” (ibid.). These interviews “are most likely to be used when technical or semi-technical issues are involved” (ibid.), and are meant to “fill in” lacking background information which is considered to be essential for a better understanding of the wider issue at hand.

On other occasions, however, the structuring and content of the question seems to call for a different kind of response. This type of question is similar to those asked in “accountability interviews” (cf. Montgomery 2007: 148). As Montgomery explains,

In news interviews of this type the emphasis falls upon calling a public figure to account in relation to an issue or event of the moment either for their own deeds or words or for the actions/statements of the institution with which they are associated. While the interviewer seeks to query the basis of a statement or action, typically the interviewee seeks to justify it. Interviewees are public figures in the sense that they hold institutional positions and by their official status are treated as ‘having some locus’ on the matter at hand. (ibid.)

While of course the context is different, the following example does suggest that the issue at hand is one of accountability, and the expected response should be framed as a form of justification. The question aims at opening a conversation in which argument – not exposition – plays a central role. Consider, for example, the following:

7) Why do you sue the people who save their seeds?
from .

Hello - like many businesses, we have formal agreements with customers to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone. When farmers choose to purchase seeds we produce, they agree by contract not to save those seeds at the end of the season.



Almost all of our customers stick to their agreements, and they want us to make sure others do too – otherwise, it's not a level playing field for them. Unfortunately, some customers sometimes don't stick to their agreements. Very rarely, these situations end up in court. In the two decades of working with a customer base of about 225,000 U.S. farmers, we have taken legal action 140 times - 12 going to trial. For us, that is a last resort.

The question posed by the anonymous reader taps into a well-known and long-lasting controversy regarding Monsanto's sale practices. Monsanto's sale agreements prohibit farmers to plant seeds saved from the previous years' crops. This means that farmers who shift to Monsanto seeds have to purchase new seeds every year. Anti-Monsanto activists argue that this practice *de facto* makes farmers dependent on Monsanto, which can then raise prices at its pleasure and – most importantly – control large part of the world's agricultural production. This is not the place to expand on the debate; suffice it to say that to anybody only vaguely familiar with Monsanto's history the polemical intent of the question cannot go unnoticed.

Monsanto's reply is very careful not to buy into the polemical intent of the question. It eschews all forms of polemical engagement by shifting the focus on the outcomes of the policy, as opposed to its motives, which it formulates in a vague manner. While not qualifying as downright evasive (Harris 1991) in the sense that the question is not answered, Monsanto's response can be interpreted as featuring a form of reformulation which “in an accountability interview will typically be seen as ‘evasive’” (Montgomery 2007: 173). The reply opens with a phrase which has the function of reducing Monsanto's individual responsibility by setting its practices in a wider context in which they appear as the norm (“like many businesses”). This introduction reduces the assertiveness of the clause that follows (“we have formal agreements with customers to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone”). This statement constitutes a powerful object of agreement in its vagueness (cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969), but while it is hard to disagree with it, it obfuscates the fact that the reason why farmers are prohibited to save seeds for future crops is not fully explained. On the contrary, it is left implicit, while the attention is focused on the issue of breach of contract. This is, of course, a legitimate answer – after all Monsanto sues farmers for breach of contract, which is a perfectly legitimate practice. But the reason why contracts prohibit seed saving is never made explicit in the answer. The phrasing of the argument insists on the voluntary nature of the contractual agreements farmers enter with Monsanto (farmers *choose* and *agree*); attempts to circumvent contractual responsibilities are framed as a form of behavior which damages other farmers – not Monsanto (which is never explicitly mentioned as a beneficiary of the agreements: the indefinite pronoun *everyone* covers both the company and the customers, but certainly does not aid the identification of beneficiaries). The responsibility of the company is further reduced by quoting figures which suggest that suing is indeed rare, and its benevolence enhanced by the definition of the practice as “a last resort”. Monsanto's reply is structured as a form of deductive reasoning (Walton et al. 2008) grounded in the assumption that breach of contract warrants the initiation of legal proceedings against the party who has



breached the agreement. All other considerations (the unethical behavior of the farmers which gain an unfair advantage over their law-abiding counterparts; the benevolence of the company which only initiates legal proceedings as a last resort; and more importantly, the exact nature of the “best possible outcomes for everyone”) are either accessory to the main argument, or constitute a premise (in the case of the claim that the function of such agreements is to ensure the best possible outcomes for everyone) which may be challenged in the course of a critical discussion by putting forth a critical question (“what makes such an agreement beneficial to everyone?”) (cf. Walton 2007). However, the strictly monologic structuring of the answer, and the impossibility for the questioner to pose such a critical question, given that no further Q-A turns are envisaged, results in dialogue being stunted, and an inadequate answer being provided. The impossibility to further probe the company makes the exchange unsatisfactory in terms of accountability questioning. While an answer is indeed provided, the underlying issue remains untackled.

The analysis conducted so far suggests that despite Monsanto’s claims as to its desire to engage in conversation with its stakeholders, its communication strategy remains strictly monologic – and, I would argue, programmatically so. Dialogue is indeed a risky business, and allowing for further moves in a true conversational fashion may jeopardize Monsanto’s risk containment strategy.

3.2.2. Communicative monodirectionality: Bayer Crop Science’s “Transparency Initiative” video

The case of Bayer Crop Science is in many ways similar. Like Monsanto, the Bayer biotech division also manages a YouTube channel the contents of which provide a useful starting point for an investigation of the company’s dialogic commitment. In the video which introduces the company’s approach to corporate communication, the noun *dialogue* and the verb *talk* occupy prominent positions. The short text accompanying Bayer Crop Science’s introductory video reads as follows:

- 8) We want to provide access to our safety data *and enter into a dialog*, so that people can clearly see how things work and why we make the conclusions we do - to help demystify the process. (Emphasis added. Source: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyIEk_YvHqR6WapMpHwKOzQ)

The video is part of a “Transparency Initiative” which Bayer Crop Science has set up to talk to the public. Example (9) provides a transcript of the first part of the video, which identifies the intended audience and clarifies the purpose of the initiative:

- 9) This one goes out to the fact guys, to the curious, the decisive ones, to those who are eager to learn, to understand, and simply to know every little detail and every little fact. But when it comes to some of the most important issues on our planet, this is often getting tough, and complex, and confusing because you don’t know who to trust, and where to find the real proven facts. That’s why we want to talk. Talk about crop protection, about



pesticides and plant medication, about the environment, and our health, and develop affordable and healthy food for a growing world population. We want to share, we want to contribute, and we want to provide you with every proven fact we know, not to sell you a product, but to connect with you and share our beliefs. Because when it comes to the essential questions, it's better to know facts, and so to rather be the fact than the gut person, and to be able to move things into perspective for yourself. You'll love it. Ready? All right. Let's start.

While the word *dialogue* occurs in the caption which accompanies the video and introduces the page devoted to the Transparency Initiative on the corporate website, little in the rest of the caption or in the video transcript suggests that anything dialogic may be going on. Interpersonal resources are indeed invoked, with the video first constructing its ideal audience ("the fact guys... the curious, the decisive ones, the ones ... eager to learn, to understand...") and then reverting to direct address once audience alignment has been secured ("we want to provide *you* with every little fact we know").

The turning point of the short speech is the statement "that's why we want to talk", which comes halfway through the video. The verb to *talk* can convey, of course, both monologic and dialogic forms of speech; within the context of a dialogue, however, one would expect it to be used in its meaning as a two- or multi-way process – a discussion in which all parties involved get an opportunity to have their say. On such a controversial topic as agrobiotechnologies, listening to your stakeholders' concerns and responding to them may be expected to be a priority. While this may well have been the intention of Bayern Crop Science, the line of communication embedded in the video appears – rhetorically speaking – to be mono-directional and monologic. The company does say that it wants to *connect* with its stakeholders, but the directionality of communication remains firmly entrenched in conventional power structures – from the corporation to the customer, from the technology expert to the layperson. The strategy of knowledge dissemination adopted continues to be shaped by the deficit model of science communication. The general assumption – common among representatives of the agrobiotech sector – is that skepticism is due to ignorance, and that once the knowledge gap is filled, opposition to biotechnologies will fade away (cf. Catenaccio 2012). Dialogue, in this context, is hardly bi-directional: it is a question-and-answer session in which stakeholders may pose questions – but only of a scientific kind, and must be prepared to hear the answers and increase their understanding of – and alignment with – the industry's view.

The problem with Bayer's Transparency initiative, as with Monsanto's "Conversation", is that despite the affordances of Web 2.0, managing conversations spanning over multiple turns remains extremely difficult even with the most advanced technology. Truly controversial questions – those which would belong by right to the genre of the accountability interview (see above) – can hardly be answered in a single turn, as Monsanto tries to do, nor can an argumentative discussion eschew considering potential objections and counterarguments. Of course, these are just first attempts, and as such bound to run into possibly unexpected hurdles and difficulties.



It should not be forgotten that the nature of the controversy – and the communicative *habitus* of participants in social media debates – is such that social media conversations on controversial, politically charged topics are rarely aimed at “resolving a conflict of opinion”: more often, they are geared towards making it more extreme, encouraging polarization, rather than mediation (see amongst others, Adamic and Glance 2005; Conover et al. 2011; Conover et al. 2012; see also Williams et al. 2015 for a study of the polarisation effect of social media interaction on the weather change debate). Under such circumstances, dialogue – however well meaning – may be indeed difficult, and perhaps close to impossible.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary investigation of the strategies of dialogic engagement purportedly deployed by the agrobiotech giants Monsanto and Byern Crop Science suggests that, despite their claims to commitment to listening to their stakeholders, they remain entrenched in conventional modes of communication which are monodirectional, subject to high levels of gatekeeping, and basically monologic. The disconnect between the wording of their claims – which feature words such as *dialogue* and *conversation* – cannot but decrease their credibility in the eyes of their detractors. At the same time, the risk of losing control of the narratives of self-legitimization which their communicative strategies serve to disseminate makes a real dialogic turn too risky to attempt. As Du et al. (2010) argue with reference to CSR (but the claim can be extended to the case at hand), there is an inevitable trade-off between controllability and credibility when communicating about issues which affect a company’s reputation and licence to operate: the more controllable the source of communication is, the less credible the message will be perceived to be. To overcome this, Du et al. (2010) advocate the use of blogs and social media to enhance credibility through word-of-mouth dissemination (Fieseler et al. 2009). The opportunities offered by media which enable dialogic interaction, however, do not appear to have even begun to be exploited. In this respect, not much seems to have changed since Esrock and Leichty (1998: 317) remarked, back in 1998, that “despite claims about how the medium will change the nature of interaction between a corporation and its publics”, web pages seem to be “primarily utilized to disseminate [...] information in much the same way as other traditional, one-way communication vehicles” (see also Ingenhoff and Koelling 2009, and Etter 2013). At the same time, the importance of dialogue and debate for the construction of corporate legitimacy continues to be advocated: as Castelló et al. (2013) put it,

research needs to better analyse how legitimacy is communicatively constituted in [...] dynamic interactions under a plurality of voices and narrations represented in new and traditional media, and how this polyphony and dissent become integral part of the legitimization process. (Castelló et al. 2013: 692)

For the time being, stakeholder dialogue continues to remain difficult – especially in



contested fields where legitimacy and reputation are under constant siege, and discursive dominance seems to be the only way out of contestation.

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