

CSR 4.0: PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: *This research analyzes the fundamental transformation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies in the context of Industry 4.0 and the implementation of the European regulatory framework (CSRD/ESRS). The study explores the transition from traditional, unilateral communication paradigms—categorized as sensegiving—toward collaborative, networked models defined as CSR 4.0. In this new paradigm, businesses and communities engage in participatory sensemaking to co-construct social value and systemic resilience. Utilizing a qualitative methodology based on directed content analysis, the research examines how the digitalization of the Triple Bottom Line model addresses structural gaps such as Romania's digital paradox. The analysis demonstrates that within the current regulatory landscape, Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) has evolved from a voluntary ethical framework into a critical prerequisite for organizational legitimacy. Consequently, non-financial reporting is repositioned as a strategic instrument for building trust and ensuring long-term institutional viability in a hyper-connected era.*

Keywords: *CSR 4.0; Industry 4.0; CSRD/ESRS; Digital Paradox; Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR); Sensemaking; Shared Value.*

JEL Classification: *M14; O33; L31; M15*

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is undergoing its most significant reconfiguration since its inception, driven by the dual forces of Industry 4.0 technological integration and a rigorous European regulatory landscape. Authentic sustainability has moved beyond formal compliance; it now requires a radical shift in how organizations perceive their role within the social ecosystem. We have shifted from a 'top-down' approach, where organizations controlled the narrative, to a collaborative model identified as CSR 4.0. In this new landscape, companies and communities work together as platform architects to co-create value and define what 'doing good' really means (Munro, 2020; Govindan, 2024). In Romania, this transformation is framed by a pronounced 'digital paradox': advanced connectivity infrastructure coexists with a workforce that largely lacks essential digital skills required for economic advancement (European Commission, 2025; DESI, 2024). The gap between infrastructure capabilities and human capital in Romania is a central challenge for any CSR 4.0 strategy, as illustrated in Figure 1.

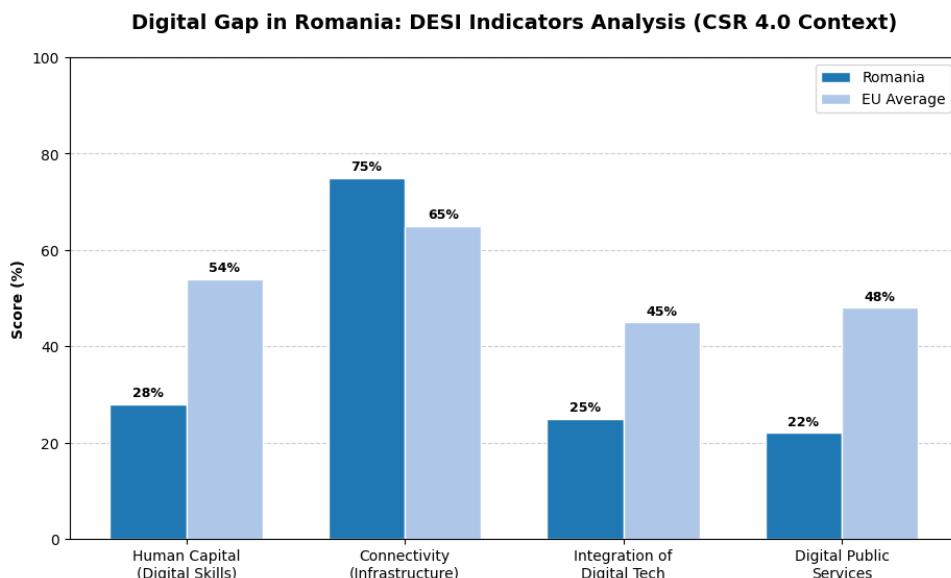


Figure 1: Comparative Analysis of DESI Indices: The Gap Between Infrastructure and Human Capital in Romania.

Source: Adapted from European Commission (2024), Digital Decade Country Report 2024: Romania. (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/ro/library/digital-decade-2024-country-reports>)

While technology has helped place Romania on the digital map, we are now facing a hard truth: good infrastructure does not automatically lead to social improvement. If people do not actually know how to use digital tools properly, all this tech goes to waste. There is a big difference between the 75% connection rate and the fact that only 28% of the workers have the basic digital skills they need. This disparity shows that infrastructure is only the beginning; without human capital, even the best technology is just a costly decoration. CSR 4.0 encourages companies to move away from mere hardware donations and instead focus on the human side—turning raw digital potential into a real-world social impact through targeted investment in skills.

The primary objectives of this research are:
O1: To evaluate how Industry 4.0 technologies enable the transition from unilateral reporting to participatory sensemaking.

O2: To analyze the impact of the current European sustainability mandate on corporate legitimacy and community resilience.

O3: To define the role of Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) as a strategic imperative within the evolving regulatory landscape.

2. Methodology

This investigation employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore the evolving meanings of responsibility in the digital age. Interpretivism is particularly suitable for exploring business ethics and sustainability, as it focuses on understanding the nuances of how actors define and negotiate responsibility in real-

world contexts (Amaya et al., 2021). The primary investigative technique is directed content analysis, as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Unlike conventional content analysis, where codes emerge inductively, directed content analysis begins with a predetermined theoretical framework—in this case, the stages of CSR (1.0 to 4.0) and Karl Weick's sensemaking properties (Assaroudi et al., 2018). This approach allows for the validation and extension of existing theory within the specific technological and cultural context of Romania (Vaileanu, 2017). The data collection involved a systematic analysis of multiple qualitative streams:

- Regulatory texts: Official European Commission directives (CSRD) and standard-setting documents (ESRS) (European Commission, 2025; Compliance & Risks, 2024).
- Primary documents: Strategic planning reports from organizations acting as partnership brokers in Romania, such as the Federation of Community Foundations in Romania (FFCR)
- Country Reports: 2024 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) data (European Commission, 2024)
- Secondary Corporate Data: Sustainability statements from industry leaders (e.g., Coca-Cola HBC, Pepco) to identify patterns of participatory engagement (Philea, 2025)

Data were unitized into themes and cross-referenced using triangulation to ensure reliability and provide a thick description of the participatory mechanisms identified.

3. Theoretical Foundations: From „Iron Law” to Strategic Shared Value

Corporate Social Responsibility, or CSR, is the idea that businesses choose to get involved in helping society, the economy, and the environment. Instead of just following the law, CSR seeks to create a fair way to make money while also doing good for everyone. Although the subject has gained unprecedented visibility in recent decades, its conceptual basis is the product of a complex intellectual and organizational evolution spanning over seven centuries (Carroll, 2008). The modern foundations of the concept were laid by Howard Bowen (1953), who defined CSR as the obligation of businesspeople to pursue policies and actions in full accordance with society's objectives and values. Bowen sensed that, while social responsibility is not a "panacea" for all systemic crises, it contains a fundamental ethical truth that must guide the businesses of the future (Bowen, 1953). This vision was expanded in the 1960s by Keith Davis, who postulated the famous "Iron Law of Responsibility," arguing that the social influence of business leaders must be directly proportional to the responsibility assumed. In an analysis almost prophetic for today's market forces, Davis warned that avoiding responsibility inevitably leads to the erosion of an organization's power (Davis, 1960). However, the path to a strong theory was not easy at all. Back in 1960, Frederick pointed out a big problem: the idea was still really unclear. He stated that schools and researchers had not yet defined what 'socially responsible behavior' truly meant in real life. This need for clarity was an important turning point. It created a clear distinction between being merely legal and actually taking real responsibility. According to Davis (1973), corporate social responsibility starts where the law stops. A business that only follows the rules is not really socially responsible; they are just obeying the law like a good "citizen." "Real responsibility means choosing to think about how decisions affect the outside world and trying to provide social good as well as making money. In contemporary literature, the

academic debate remains polarized between two major schools of thought: The Restrictive View (Milton Friedman), which represents the benchmark for CSR skepticism. Friedman argued that the sole responsibility of business is to maximize profit for shareholders (shareholder primacy), with any social involvement seen as an unjustified use of the owners' capital (Friedman, 1970).

The Strategic View (Porter and Kramer): Proposes a reconciliation through the idea of "creating shared value." CSR is no longer perceived as a peripheral activity or a cost, but as a strategic option for generating competitive advantage by responding to societal needs (Porter & Kramer, 2011). The maturation of these concepts in the digital era is today systematized into four distinct stages that reflect a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between business and society. The growth of these ideas in today's digital world has been organized into four clear stages that reflect a significant shift in how businesses and society relate to each other. It all started with CSR 1.0 (1960–1980), a time when companies tried to help through charity, but their efforts were often haphazard. Then, as it evolved into CSR 2.0, businesses became smarter by linking their social goals to making money to achieve greater impact. By the time we got to CSR 3.0, being responsible was not just something extra; it became a fundamental part of a company's identity. Now, we are in CSR 4.0, where being sustainable is a natural and active part of business, supported by digital tools, strong connections, and real-time information (Visser, 2011; Munro, 2020). For an in-depth analysis of the operational systems, Table 1 synthesizes the fundamental differences between the stages of CSR, showing the transition from a unilateral communication mechanism (Sensegiving) toward a participatory one (Sensemaking), specific to the Digital 4.0 era.

Table 1: A comparative framework of strategic dimensions and communication patterns across CSR stages (1.0 - 4.0)

CSR Stage	Name	Strategic Characteristics	Communication Mechanism
CSR 1.0	Corporate Philanthropy	Reactive donations, defensive PR, sporadic actions	Unilateral Sensegiving (Top-down)
CSR 2.0	Strategic CSR	Alignment with economic goals, efficiency, circularity	Voluntary reporting, proactive PR
CSR 3.0	Integrated CSR	Part of business culture, long-term social impact	Digital dialogue, stakeholder involvement
CSR 4.0	CSR 4.0 (Systemic)	Co-creation, CTV (Creating Transformed Value), digitalization	Participatory Sensemaking (Bottom-up)

Source: Author's processing in Python based on Carroll (1979), Visser (2011), and Govindan (2024).

This shift from occasional giving to a central part of business plans now influences how organizations operate in a more connected world (Moura-Leite & Padgett, 2011). The push for digital transformation and the growth of tech-savvy generations make this idea central to Corporate Social Responsibility 4.0. While Davis (1960) discussed how business leaders wield social power, by 2026, this power will be shaped by technology and large volumes of data. Because of this, organizations

must adopt more collaborative approaches, such as those encouraged by the Federation of Community Foundations in Romania, to maintain their reputations globally.

The CSR 4.0 approach is closely tied to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, in which technology shifts from a tool for efficiency to an essential part of business values. In this setting, Sustainability is grounded in data, and digital responsibility becomes the main principle of being a good corporate citizen. Govindan (2024) points out that to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), organizations now need to significantly change their cultures, with digital responsibility at the heart of their efforts for sustainable development.

4. From the Triple Bottom Line to Algorithmic Governance and Systemic Partnerships

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) model, created by John Elkington back in 1997, provided a way to evaluate how companies are doing not just by looking at money, but also by dividing their results into three areas: Profit, People, and Planet. Under the impetus of the 2030 Agenda, this model is being rapidly transformed by Industry 4.0 technologies that enable precise measurement of social and environmental impacts. Because of this, TBL is moving from just being an idea to something that can actually be used and checked right away. This change makes CSR a key way for organizations to match their goals with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their 169 specific targets. (Elkington, 1997; Ursu & Ban, 2025). Digital technology is changing the core of Sustainability by greatly reducing information gaps. Blockchain technology helps the economy by making money transfers secure and reducing expenses. Digital platforms and mood tracking enhance social interactions by enabling quick, community-focused responses. IoT sensors, combined with Digital Twins, benefit the environment by turning carbon emissions into automated data for simple financial updates (Zaitsev, 2024). Govindan (2024) highlights a significant shift in how we implement CSR 4.0, emphasizing 23 essential practices to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The study shows that ethical information management and having digital resources are the core elements of success today, going beyond traditional physical efforts. In the age of Artificial Intelligence, responsibility thus shifts from the tangible sphere toward the moral governance of algorithms and information flows. The transition toward Industry 5.0 adds a human-centric dimension to this digital ecosystem, transforming CSR 4.0 governance into a decentralized social operating system. In this new model, corporations transcend their roles as solitary decision-makers to become platform architects, in which stakeholders become co-owners of the resulting impact (European Commission, 2022; Munro, 2020).

In the core of this complex architecture lies SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Recent literature points to a fundamental truth: no single entity can manage the current complexity of Sustainability in isolation. At this inflection point, the role of "partnership brokers", such as the Federation of Community Foundations in Romania (FFCR), becomes vital. "These organizations act as the 'boots on the ground,' turning the raw power of 4.0 technologies and corporate funding into a living network of donors, mentors, and local residents. This bottom-up approach is the key to solving Romania's Digital Paradox; it allows solutions to grow naturally within the communities that need them most, rather than being imposed from the top down (Schwab, 2016; Ursu & Ban, 2025).

5. Communication Paradigms in the Digital Age: From Sensegiving to Sensemaking

In the era of Industry 4.0, communicating about social responsibility shifts from a 'sender-receiver' model to a conversation where meaning is co-constructed. Morsing and Schultz (2006) describe this as a shift from simply 'telling a story' to manage an image, to 'listening and engaging' to build a shared commitment. Sensegiving refers to organizations passively disseminating information to shape a favorable image, positioning stakeholders as external recipients of a predetermined narrative. On the flip side, sensemaking is an active social activity. It is a place where people come together to determine what is important and evaluate the effects, transforming social responsibility into a common goal. In CSR 4.0, communication is a mechanism for listening and growth. Recent research indicates that the readability and honesty of sustainability reports are key to building trust; clear, non-technical language fosters deeper connections (Weick, 1995; Schoeneborn et al., 2020). By choosing words that are easy for everyone to understand, companies do more than share information; they build real and lasting trust with their customers (Wirtz et al., 2026; Han et al., 2025). In a world increasingly influenced by Generative AI, we must discover common meaning. Now, both workers and the general public must strike a careful balance: embracing rapid change while upholding our moral foundations. This requires ongoing effort from people to ensure that, as our tools change, they continue to reflect the values we care about (Mogaji & Jain, 2024; Shin, 2021).

Table 2: The Strategic Shift in CSR Communication: Sensegiving vs. Participatory Sensemaking.

Characteristic	Sensegiving Model (CSR 1.0 - 2.0)	Sensemaking Model (CSR 3.0 - 4.0)
Flow Direction	Unidirectional (Firm to public)	Bi-directional and multi-lateral
Stakeholder Role	Passive information receiver	Co-constructor of meaning and value
Primary Objective	Reputation and image management	Building trust and resilience
Technology Used	Traditional media, static websites	Social media, crowdsourcing, Blockchain
Verifiability	Unaudited statements, PR-driven	Real-time data, algorithmic monitoring

Source: Author’s processing in Python based on Morsing & Schultz (2006), Weick (1995), Govindan (2024), and Wirtz et al. (2026)

This change embodies Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR). In a world increasingly influenced by algorithms, technologies like blockchain and real-time tracking do more than keep records—they give people the power to hold companies accountable for their actions. For organizations like the FFCR, this technology turns the local community into a 'co-constructor' of their mission. When people join in and share their thoughts on digital platforms right away, they are not just watching; they are helping to create a more truthful and open future (Carl & Hinz, 2024).

6. Regulatory Imperatives: The CSRD Directive and ESRS Standards

The current implementation phase of Directive (EU) 2022/2464 (CSRD) represents a critical shift in corporate accountability. This regulation introduces a level of rigor comparable to financial accounting (IAS; KPMG, 2022). Central to this shift is the 'double materiality' principle. This concept operationalizes the strategic interdependence first highlighted by Porter and Kramer (2006), who argued that successful businesses require a healthy society, and conversely, a healthy society depends on successful companies. which mandates a bidirectional analysis:

- Impact Materiality (Inside-Out): The effects of an enterprise on people and the environment.
- Financial Materiality (Outside-In): Sustainability risks that affect the company's bottom line.

Under the pressure of the Omnibus I simplification package, the legislative framework has evolved toward a "reporting realism," with thresholds adjusted to balance regulatory rigor with executive viability (Directive 2026/47; Crowell, 2026). In the 2026 regulatory landscape, this dual perspective has moved from a strategic choice to a mandatory requirement. As noted by Stratos (2025), it is no longer sufficient to analyze only internal economic impacts. The ESRS framework now mandates a bidirectional approach: impact materiality (the 'inside-out' effects on people and the environment) and financial materiality (the 'outside-in' sustainability risks and opportunities that affect the bottom line). Within the ESRS, any mention of "materiality" inherently refers to this dual perspective (EFRAG, 2026). The system was further refined by the Omnibus I package, which reduced the number of mandatory data points by approximately 60%, allowing organizations to focus on truly relevant indicators (ISS Corporate, 2026). A key technical development is the introduction of the "value chain cap," a legal safeguard that protects smaller entities (with fewer than 1,000 employees) in the supply chain. This measure prevents large corporations from demanding data from their suppliers that exceeds the Voluntary Standard for SMEs (VSME), thereby shielding SMEs from inordinate administrative burdens (Latham & Watkins, 2026; Karomia, 2026). Furthermore, reporting has become entirely digital; the Inline XBRL format is now mandatory, providing global comparability of sustainability data (IRIS Carbon, 2026). In this context, limited assurance or compulsory external auditing serves as the pillar that transforms transparency from a PR exercise into a compliance demand, audited with the same rigor as financial reporting (Cuadrado-Ballesteros et al., 2017; KPMG, 2022). This rigorosity forces associations to seek social partners capable of providing impact data validated by "grassroots" realities. Consequently, the governance standards of networks such as the Federation of Community Foundations in Romania (FFCR) become a vital strategic asset. By providing audited, rigorously documented impact data, these networks offer corporations the infrastructure to meet CSRD requirements, transforming mere bureaucratic compliance into an authentic strategy for social resilience (FFCR, 2026; KPMG, 2022).

7. Illustrative examples: Operationalizing CSR 4.0 in Romania

While this research is primarily conceptual, the role of "partnership brokers" like the Federation of Community Foundations in Romania (FFCR) provides a pragmatic illustration of these theories. The FFCR manages a network of 16 certified

foundations, acting as a "trust broker" and providing digital CSR infrastructure. (Romanian American Fund, 2021).

The Federation of Community Foundations in Romania (FFCR) serves as a model for operationalizing SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by managing a network of 16 certified foundations across 39 counties. With a 16-year track record of mobilizing over 138 million RON and supporting more than 11,700 local initiatives, the FFCR has transcended the traditional role of a fund intermediary, evolving into a "trust broker" and a provider of digital CSR infrastructure (FFCR, 2025; Gehringer, 2020). By utilizing advanced crowdfunding and grant management platforms, the Federation has transformed CSR communication from a corporate monologue into a participatory sensemaking process. This radical translucency allows stakeholders to track impact in real time, thereby strengthening the goodwill of mate companies and dispelling the doubt frequently associated with one-way communication (FFCR, 2026).

A key example is the Științescu Fund, which addresses Romania's digital paradox by directing corporate investment toward STEAM education. By matching donors with local innovators, the fund prepares "digital natives" for the future economy, transforming investment into long-term human capital. Similarly, the national "Sustainability Board" program (Coca-Cola HBC, FFCR, Penny Romania) demonstrates participatory sensemaking by involving citizens in the design phase of environmental and social interventions, ensuring that reporting satisfies the rigorous traceability requirements of the current reporting landscape (

8. Discussions and Conclusions

In the modern corporate ecosystem, Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) has transitioned from a voluntary ethical framework into a critical component of institutional legitimacy. CDR involves the ethical stewardship of data and algorithms across four pillars: social, economic, technological, and environmental responsibility (Asa & Nautwima, 2026).

In this environment, the FFCR inventories match companies with audited impact data, allowing investors and the public to form opinions about vindicated social issues rather than superficial public-relations narratives. Industry 4.0 technologies facilitate external validation of social impact with exceptional accuracy, ensuring that digitalization of the Triple Bottom Line aligns economic performance with advancements in community digital skills. The findings suggest that success in the digital economy depends on generating "circular fiscal value," where sustainability is a strategic asset creating both economic performance and social stability. Success is increasingly measured by Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) related to beneficiaries' digital skills rather than superficial narratives (Ansari et al., 2025).

In conclusion, the CSR 4.0 paradigm marks the maturation of corporate responsibility. It is an ecosystem where empathy meets algorithms, ensuring that reporting is no longer a bureaucratic burden but a strategic engine for real-world impact. The future of sustainability in Romania depends on adopting digitalized social operating models that prioritize co-creation, transparency, and human-centricity.

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