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CONFERENCES AS FIELD-CONFIGURING EVENTS – THE ROLE OF CSR EXPERT CONFERENCES IN CONSTRUCTING AND MAINSTREAMING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR CSR

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For many in academia and industry, corporate social responsibility (CSR) was long seen as a fad and fashion of transitory nature, similar to other management fashions (Abrahamson 1996). Results from empirical research into the business value of CSR were ambiguous (Weber 2008). During this time of widespread doubt, Academy of Business in Society (EABIS) president Gilbert Lenssen (2007) commented that the difficulty about the business case for CSR is a matter of ‘accepting’ the intrinsic link between CSR and competitiveness. Hence, this contribution draws attention to the role of CSR expert conferences in creating the business case argument for CSR and reinforcing its acceptance. Conferences and expert communities are important for the framing of management thinking and the configuration and evolution of new fields (Aldrich & Fiol 1994; Meyer et al. 2005; Lampel & Meyer 2008; Dobusch et al. 2010). The social element of expert communities and the physical element of expert conferencing require and inspire each other. They are institutionally bound, but publically indicate direction of how intellectual space is filled. The study draws on participant observation (especially natural occurring talk) and written conference material (e.g. promotion, photos, presentations, media coverage) of international CSR conference series in Germany during 2004 and 2008 – retrospectively, the period in which the modern idea of CSR started to spread and rise around Europe (Breitbarth 2011). The evolution of the business case for CSR occurred in three stages: creating momentum (2004/05), maturing the field (2006/07), and mainstreaming CSR (2008). Thereby, a more or less coordinated coalition of various expert actor groups translated the voluntary/normative nature of past CSR discussions into a modern business rationale.