THE ROLE OF CEOS IN MANAGING CORPORATE REPUTATION THROUGH COMMUNICATION LEADERSHIP AMONG THE LEADING MEDIA GOVERNMENT-LINKED COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper forwards as a proposal to conduct a study that will explore and examine the role of CEOs as communication leaders among the leading media government-linked companies. All the other C-level executives who will be later identified as part of the top-level corporate communication team will be included. Their collective narratives are expected to yield ideas concerning how their respective corporate communication schemes are structured, managed and practiced. The main research question is: how does the role of the CEO influence or mediate in the relationship between communication leadership and corporate reputation strategies? By addressing this main question, new forms of knowledge can be derived. The most crucial among which is how the leading media government-linked companies are utilizing their media resources and C-level talents to promote corporate reputation. This of course is in view of their high vulnerability to strong institutional/political pressures. A qualitative research method is proposed because thick narrative data are needed in order to capture a robust understanding on C-level practices of reputation management through communication. Data collection will be made through face-to-face in-depth interviews. The voice-recorded interviews will be replayed, transcribed, organized and will undergo thematic analysis for pattern detection and theme generation. The main theory that will be used to interpret the findings and guide the analysis is institutional theory. This theory is pertinent in view of the structural preconditions that govern and give the leading media government-linked companies their legitimacy. A precedent study has used neo-institutional theories in explaining the interactions involved between the media, society and organizations in relation to CEO communication and positioning. After academic validation, the study aspires to make a significant contribution to the study of communication leadership. At this writing the amount of literature available on communication leadership in the context of Malaysian leading media government-linked companies is relatively scant.

Keywords: corporate reputation, communication leadership, leading media government-linked companies

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

The concept of corporate communication may be simplistically assumed as both "internal and external" in form, like perhaps in a form existing in a non-mass media organization. According to Macnamara et al., (2015), study empirically indicated that lack of consistent understanding of communication value among practitioners. Where, multitude of rationales was used to explain the value of communication to top executives, ranging from building reputation and brands, gaining thought leadership and preventing crises, to stimulating sales or employee motivation. In a mass media enterprise, the external component might nevertheless include elements that are related to the media contents they produce, because such are considered as company products. Thus, similar to managing tangible products, it is logical to assume that media-based CEOs would also oversee the quality of contents the production staff creates. The CEO may not be able to inspire a competitive strategy in tangible terms like product leadership, but intangibly as communication leadership among the various strands of communicators within the media company. A media company is practically composed of content producers who communicate through their creations via mass media. Therefore, according to Frandsen and Johansen (2013), the relationship between the organization, with the presence and existence of other stakeholders, involving both verbal and behavioral activities are playing its own role too.

Media companies maintain a set of standards by which their corporate reputation is anchored. Often, for news organizations, accuracy, independence and impartiality (reflected in their "products") are key determinants (Riordan, 2014). Media ownership and other issues like funding or financial sustenance do nonetheless pose threats (real or perceived bias) to media independence and integrity. The chief executive officers (CEOs) of media outlets are neither spared of say, attribution of bias by affinity or by political association. For the CEOs of Government-linked media companies, due to the inherent structure of their organizations, the perceptions of bias by the public could be a lot more daunting.

Corporate structure influences what needs to be and how information ought to be communicated. In terms of positioning and managing corporate communication, the Government-linked media companies may take up forms and practices that are different from their non-government-linked counterparts due to differences with their respective ownership structures. With the Malaysian Government having a direct controlling stake, Government-linked media companies would appear as the more exposed ones to political influence or state intervention than privately-held media corporations.

Conceivable linkages like such may negatively impact on media credibility and contribute to the other reputational challenges that media companies may be facing already. Towards sustaining or improving corporate reputation, the leadership of the chief executive officer (CEO) in corporate communication is important. By *direct* means, the CEO assumes the key management responsibility in overseeing how corporate communications are undertaken. By *indirect* means, the CEO is the chief communicator and assumes an emblematic role, in the sense that corporate reputation and CEO reputation may be often viewed as intertwined in the public eye (Kitchen & Laurence, 2003). Notwithstanding, what the CEO projects in public reflect a representation of the incumbent government to which, the CEO role in a Government-linked media companies is at the very least, nominally linked.

Problem Statement

On the ground of corporate reputation, the proposed study seeks to understand how CEOs enact their roles as a media communication leader and as a political-appointee in some ways that do not compromise the reputation of the media organization they represent. In the past, the relationships between the state, the ruling party, government-linked corporations and the mass media in Malaysia were linked to negative public perceptions towards a number of mainstream media outlets (Anuar, 2004). Government control over the mass media, (in the name of political stability and national security as reasons) has been criticized as a major cause that threatens media freedom and credibility (Anuar, 2004; Sani, 2007; Kim, 2014). On the other hand, credibility and trustworthiness of mass media are critical to corporate reputation (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Oyedeji, 2006).

While such criticism on the quality of some mass media may be considered valid, there is little information available that could inform how the Government-linked media companies protect their corporate reputations amidst various relationships between actors and agencies governed by institutional context surrounding it (Lanczi & O'Neil, 1996). Anuar (2004) examined the relationship between the state and the mass media from a political perspective, yet, corporate reputation by any mass media organization was not mentioned. Abbott (2011), in his study of electoral authoritarianism and the print media in Malaysia, has found a strong presence of pro-government bias in some newspapers. His study attributes such bias to corporate ownership and its perceived impact; to the legislative framework; and, lack of critical reportage that can be explained by the predominant cultural, political and social values embedded in the institutional context.

Purpose of the study:

The other aspect such as communication practices; crisis communication, strategic communication and managerial communication have been studied. Unfortunately, those studies didn't include from the CEO views and perspective (Hartley & Bruckmann, 2002; Quirke, 2010). Given the perceived impact of pro-government bias, the purpose for this study is to fill the gap in the literature by studying how the CEOs are addressing issues of biases and protect their reputation through corporate communication. The aim is to explore how the CEOs of Government-linked media companies enact their roles as communication leaders and to inquire how their corporate communication schemas are structured and managed. The study can offer insights, perspectives and concepts on structures and practices of Government-linked media companies in managing corporate reputation through communication.

General Objectives:

To examine from the narratives reflecting how CEOs use leadership as communication leader and address reputational strategies and challenges.

Research Objectives

1) To determine how does CEO of Government-linked media companies do address corporate reputation as a communication leader of media organization?
2) To explore how does CEO of Government-linked media companies communicate their roles as a leaders of GLC and of a media organization at the same time?
3) To examine how does the role of CEO influence in the relationship between communication leadership and corporate communication strategies?
4) To determine how does CEO think corporate communication is functioning in relation to their roles in corporate communication?

The narrative data will be analyzed, interpreted and reported as findings.

Research Questions

1) How do CEOs of Government-linked media companies communicate their roles as leaders of a GLC and of a media organization at the same time?
2) How does the role of the CEO influence in the relationship between communication leadership and corporate reputation strategies?
3) How do CEOs think corporate communication is functioning in relation to their roles in corporate communication?

Significance of the study:
The proposed study aspires to make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in the field of corporate communication in the context of state-owned media organization. The study will be an addition to the existing literature on corporate

communication in the local Malaysian context focused on government-linked media enterprises, which is lacking so far. Probably unprecedented, its completion may bring forward new knowledge on, for example, the management structure of corporate communication in the leading media government-linked companies. If the study succeeds in addressing the research questions, the findings may inspire future research in communication leadership that still has a vast unexplored area.

Literature Review:

The subjects of academic interest for the proposed study are the CEOs of Government-linked media companies that appear to have two roles, first, as a leader of a government-linked corporation and second, as a leader of a mass media organization. Each organization has its own structural attributes that determine how CEOs ought to function (Gabbioneta, Greenwood, Mazzola & Minoja, 2013). Conceivably, as consistent with expectations of an institutional view, these CEOs perform dual roles that can be sometimes conflicting, especially if the state-owned media is politicized (Anuar, 2005) and the mass media, as an institute, is ideally independent, objective and non-partisan (Biagi, 2016; Street, 2011; Detmer, 1998).

CEOs are actors within structured institutions that shape their identities and interests (Scott, 2001). Thus, enacting dual institutional roles could mean much as a division of focus (Pinder & Usherwood, 2013) which can be critical to legitimizing the adoption of specific corporate and business strategies due to other industry associations (Nordqvist, Picard & Pesamaa, 2010; Papaioannou, Watkins, Kale & Mugwagwa, 2015). Therefore, clarifying the roles of CEOs could be of some great importance (Rothwell, 2015) in the area of winning stakeholders' trust or of the corporate board, as one example (Rivero, 2004).

Institutionalized role orientation

Towards further theoretical discovery, *institutional theory* is found relevant in drawing some explanations over these CEO roles. More particularly, the *sociological institutional* theory that suggests, the CEO role is embedded in a social institution of normative, cognitive and regulative social processes that legitimize the concepts and the functions attached to the role (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Amenta & Ramsey, 2009). These processes/elements, when translated into expectations, can exert pressure upon CEOs to respond or behave in a way deemed legitimate (Mutizwa, 2015). Deviation from the institutional order that may not successfully result to wider acceptance may be meted with criticisms. Fearing possible reprisal, a CEO may instead respond by complying with the expectations or mimicking successful business models (DellaPosta, Nee & Opper, 2016) for the purposes of maintaining stability and consistency amidst uncertainty.

In an institutionalized orientation, therefore, obedience and conformity to rules and norms are encouraged. Individuals are taught to respond in the same way that existing organizational members would respond (Jones, 2013). This could explain why organizations in a given field are similar (Palthe, 2014). The process by which organizations in a population become alike or similar is called organizational isomorphism (Jones, 2013).

Responding to institutional pressures

From a neo-institutional theory perspective, organizations tend to respond in conformity with what constitutes acceptable behavior for that specific environment and particular moment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). When affected by internal and external pressures (including uncertainties), organizations may adopt certain behaviors and copy strategies, structures and approaches from another, because of the belief that by doing so, they will increase their chances of survival/success (Jones, 2013). Hence, as more organizations perform similar approaches within the population, the more they become similar to one another (Amenta & Ramsey, 2009). This formation of similarities in processes/structures between organizations is referred to as *isomorphism* that developed as a result of coercive (regulatory and societal pressures); mimetic (copy, mimic, benchmark) and normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) processes that developed over time. Its cause and effect structure underpins the operational relationships found in a community of organizations (Strang & Meyer, 1993).

Thus, *isomorphism* can provide a picture of the Government-linked media companies' framework as a system and as an institution of its own. When applied to the proposed study, *isomorphism* can help explain similarities and variations in communication approach (Fredriksson, Pallas & Wehmeier, 2013) that Government-linked media companies take in relation to addressing both internal and external pressures they confront. Eventually, responses to the qualitative inquiry might also lead to informing the source and the nature of such pressures.

Related studies

In the area of *CEO communication and positioning,* Zerfass, Vercic and Wiesenberg (2016) used the *neo-institutional theory* in explaining the interactions involved between the media, society and organizations in relation to CEO communication and positioning. Towards explaining the relationship between society and the media, the theory of *normative institutionalism* was selected. Aside from its affinity with, and being a sub-field of *neo-institutionalism,* it provides an explanation over what the media ought to be doing as it is being guided by certain norms and formal rules of institutions that guide their actions.

In a study on *media governance,* Puppis (2010) chose the *neo-sociological institutionalism* theory to explain the rules that aim to organize media systems. On democratic media governance, Hamelink and Nordenstreng (2007) cited the *normative positions* in determining the role and objectives rendered by the media, and cited the *institutional arrangements* towards understanding what directs the media to fulfill those rules and objectives.

In relation to corporate reputation, the *theory of social expectations,* as akin to institutional theory and its sub-constructs, will be explored to further ascertain its applicability. Based on the social expectation theory, meeting or failing to meet expectations has an impact on the corporate's reputation (Deephouse, 2000). Here, company reputation is anchored upon the perceived ability to fulfill roles expected by the public from corporations, thus, public expectations can become among the criteria for measuring corporate reputation (Davies, 2016).

In examining the importance of *public opinion and communication performance* to reputation, Zerfass and Sherzada (2015) made use of neo-institutionalism to develop their assumptions on the complex interactions between society, organization and communication as agency. Part of that assumption was anchored on the symbiotic relationship between chief executive officers (CEOs) and communication professionals. They cited the work of Scott (2001) and referred to the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars for fleshing out the rules, regulations, the norms and values, and the shared beliefs that constitute social reality or the symbolic world that influences organizational behavior.

In addressing a research question which pertained to perceptions/expectations of CEOs and the executive board members on the relevance of public opinion and of the mediating role of corporate communications to organizational reputation and success, Zerfass and Sherzada (2015) mentioned some determinants of communication performance: (a) *shared expectations* as a key enabler of excellent communications; (b) personal communication which emphasizes the communicative role of the CEOs; (c) an understanding of their own roles as communication professionals by those supporting the CEO; (d) personal engagement as communicator by the CEOs and top executives themselves; and, (e) sense of involvement from the top executives and the impression that they are personally responsible for communication as well. By these, Zerfass and Sherzada (2015) suggest that, a sort of "institutionalization" over organizational values, norms, beliefs and processes is needed in order to achieve better corporate communication performance that contributes to promoting good reputation, image and trust in a more consistent manner. Their study (Zerfass and Sherzada, 2015) presented some evidence showing that, differing views, perceptions and mindsets of top executives and the CEOs, weakens the alignment between principles and agents in corporate communications. Reputation is part of the corporate positioning process that requires consistency (among the chief officers) and a clear-cut idea of it as a core competency or competitive advantage (Deephouse, 2000; Schreiber, 2002).

The CEO and C-level officers

Corporate reputation is a collective representation (Fombrun & Rindova, 2005), not merely by the CEO alone – who acts as the chief corporate communicator (Bennis, 1997), but even by the C-level or chief officers (i.e. CFO, COO, CMO, CIO and CCO) who are not only there to support the CEO, but also to offer their own insights and contribute to key decisions (Groysberg, Kelly & MacDonald, 2011). In some companies, top executives are considered a key driver corporate reputation (Zerfass et al., 2016). Just as so, the CEO may need the backing of a corporate communication specialist to develop programs for internal and external stakeholders in a manner consistent with the corporate identity (Kitchen & Laurence, 2003).

Communication and corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is a complex business (Watson, 2010), and is not a matter of slogan-building or self-aggrandizing (Martin & Burke, 2012). According to Watson (2010), reputation does not occur by chance, for it is intertwined with leadership, management, organizational operations, relations (with stakeholders) and connected with communication activities and feedback mechanisms. Such a connection between communication and reputation has been established in a number of studies (Yamauchi, 2001; Kitchen & Laurence, 2003; Forman & Argenti, 2005; Neill, 2015).

An exploratory study by Forman and Argenti (2005) was guided by the assumption that a company's reputation is influenced, if not determined, by the effectiveness of the corporate communication function. In their study, Kitchen and Laurence (2003) conclude that an unplanned, uncoordinated and uncontrolled communication will impact on the top, middle and bottom lines, which is why, corporate communication must be mastered by the corporation and those duly appointed to speak on its behalf. Neill (2015), in her study, was able to identify and expand a list of domain-specific specialties associated with corporate communications that include: media relations, crisis communication, content writing, social media, reputation management, internal communications and government relations.

Communication Leadership

Noticeably, although there are programs in higher learning institutions about Communication leadership which contents are different, the rendered emphases in respect to leadership appear to follow a consistent universal line. That is, the course is designed to polish communication skills and offers opportunities for communication professionals to become influential and inspirational leaders – who can inspire action, persuade and influence change through effective leadership. Communication Leadership calls for environmental sensitivity (listening) and an interplay between an organization and the needs of its constituency by connecting authentically with others. Communicative leadership practices influence the enactment of the leadership relationship and balance agency, defined as a capacity to act (Tourish, 2014) between organizational actors.

Applying the said descriptions into the context of the proposed research, it is presupposed that Communication Leadership is mediated and managed by the CEO, and engages C-level executives to hone their own communication skills so they too, will have the opportunity to become effective communication leaders and vanguards of corporate reputation. In a book by Harrison and Muhlberg (2013) of Georgetown University, however, Communication Leadership is described as a shared effort/task between the CEO and the CCO. Although both of them are recognized as communication leaders, it is the CCO who takes the

lead role and main person held accountable for conceiving/managing the content and information flow; for engaging/influencing the company's stakeholders; and, for articulating corporate and shared cultures in promoting productive levels of attitude and performance (Harrison & Muhlberg, 2013).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A relational concept of C-level executives managing their own "reputational quarters is indicated in *Figure 1.0 (Conceptual framework illustration)*," CEO is seen at the helm of the communication leadership. Down in the middle is found the "heart," representing the role expectations from the CEO in his capacity as the organization's overall leader. Internally, the CEO is cognisant about and oversees the operating functions associated with four "reputational dimensions": governance mechanisms, financial performance, mass media content and, vision and leadership. The red matte represents hard reputational concerns (critical-to-business issues) while the blue one represents soft reputational concerns (non-critical issues).

Corporate communications is conceptualized here as a partnership between the CEO and the CCO. Together, they cover all four dimensions. The COO's task includes internal and external listening from the ground. Each dimension is a determinant of reputation respectively informed by one or more C-level executives whose role and competence are aligned with the context of that dimension. Yet ideally, as the literature suggests, the CEO is the person who could best personify the corporate vision, mission and culture. The CEO also embodies leadership. Thus, in this framework, the CEO joins the other C-level executives in assuming communication leadership roles according to their own expertise. All the C-level executives given a domain (to manage) reports directly to the CCO, while the latter, reports directly to the CEO.

The above is merely a concept being developed for the purposes of instigating an inquiry. Thus, the proposed study now has a starter-framework to relate back for future guidance. It will be reexamined to determine what literature needs to be reviewed in-depth, more particularly in relation to the components associated with the four reputational dimensions described. The above will also guide what questions to ask and thus, would ensure that the line of questioning is aligned with the research questions every time.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study is proposed in order to fully explore and obtain elaborative information through face-to-face interviews. A broad spectrum of preliminary questioning is anticipated before narrowing down to the core questions. The preliminary questions will be directed at establishing important industry backgrounds, more particularly in probing whether media bias is among the reputational issues they are confronting. The core questions will also contain a series of semi-structured questions that directly addresses the research question/s.

Sampling

The corporate status, industry, names of organizations and the locations of the prospective participants are already available. To recruit, the researcher will write a formal letter of invitation, accompanied by a few statements explaining the purpose of the study. The letters will be individually hand-delivered. This can be conveniently done since the sample target is few (just around five) and all are located in Kuala Lumpur. A stamp-mark signifying receipt will be requested.

Data Collection

Interviews – the researcher will make the necessary follow-ups until a confirmed schedule is arranged. The venue of the interview is requested to take place in the office or within a space designated by the CEO. Proper decorum will be observed. Permission to audio-record the interviews will be sought. The interviewee will be informed of his rights to refuse a question s/he feels uncomfortable answering. The interviews will last about one hour and conducted in English.

Transcription – the voice recordings will be replayed and transcribed in MS Word format. A completed transcription will be organized and filed in a flash disc to prevent accidental or unauthorized PC access. The data will be kept in a safe location until it is time for its retrieval.

Analytical concept:

There are two sources of data for analysis – the interview data, which is the primary source and the literature – the secondary source. The interview data will be coded for patterns and themes. The themes will be analyzed alongside theories accounted in the literature to generate interpretive meaning and synthesized knowledge. The synthesized knowledge will be elaborated and evaluated to determine how the quality of the findings addresses each of the research questions. (Please see *Figure 2.0– Analytical Concept*)

Data Analysis

Theme generation – after retrieval, the transcripts will be read and re-read many times over. Phrases or sentences that are relevant to the questions will be placed in cells (along with other excerpts) to a labeled table for coding, pattern matching and categorization. From the synthesis of the categories that developed (from the codes and the patterns), a theme is generated. These coding and theme generation processes will be repeated according to the number of samples at hand.

Theme analysis – a descriptive reporting for each theme will be written and used towards the stages of analysis. The analyses will be carried out by comparing and synthesizing of the results with the theories from which the interview questions were based. Depending on the turnout, individually analyzed themes may be consolidated as common among all cases or otherwise treated as a contextual theme. Meaning, the findings appear to exist only in particular to a specific organization.

Research Ethics

The researcher will ensure that the study will be conducted in full compliance with ethical research standards set for a PhD-level thesis. The researcher will submit all necessary documentations and seek the permission of the University prior to any conduct that will involve third party participation. The researcher will adhere to self-regulated ethical practices from the early stages of recruiting up to the final submission of the thesis. Among those that will be observed are: proper notifications and giving the participants the options to withdraw from the interview or decline a question; safekeeping of the raw and processed interview data and the destruction of data years after the study has been completed.

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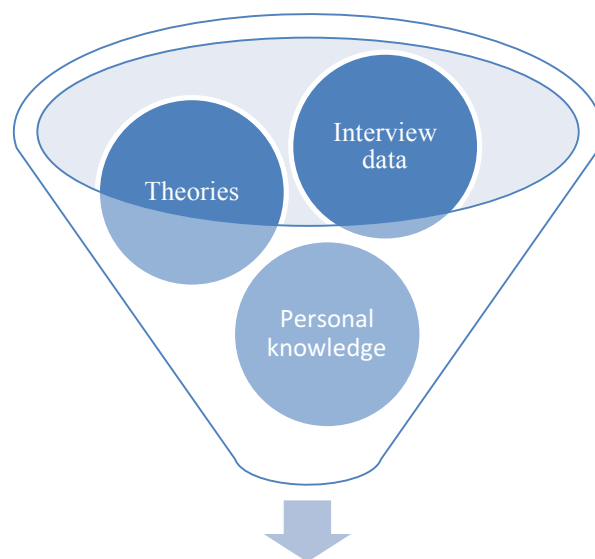
Appendix

Figure 1.0: Conceptual framework illustration
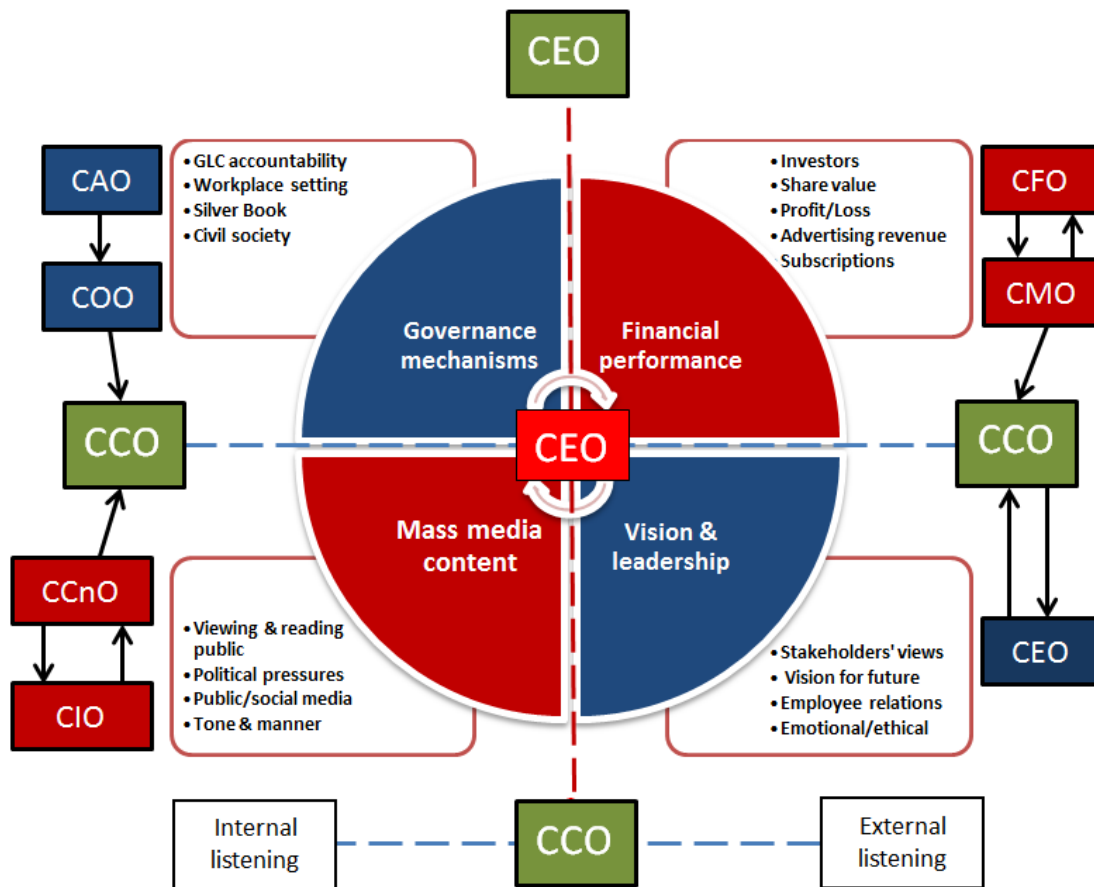
LEGEND:

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CCO	Chief Communication Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CMO	Chief Marketing Officer
CIO	Chief Information Officer
CCnO	Chief Content Officer
COO	Chief Operating Officer
CAO	Chief Administrative Officer

Figure 2.0: Analytical concept

Synthesized knowledge (Triangulation) and study findings
in relation to the research questions.

Biodata:

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